

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

Strong Press, Strong Democracy

## *The Scandal Beat*

How college sports reporting helps block real reform  
DANIEL LIBIT

### ALL THE PRESIDENT'S PUNDITS

PAUL STAROBIN

### HOW TV CLOSED ITS EYES AND OPENED ITS MOUTH

DAVE MARASH

TRANSPARENCY WATCH

### OBAMA FLUNKS SCIENCE

CURTIS BRAINARD

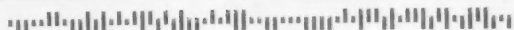
### NEWS CORP. IS TOO DAMN BIG

THE EDITORS

SEP / OCT 2011 • CJR.ORG



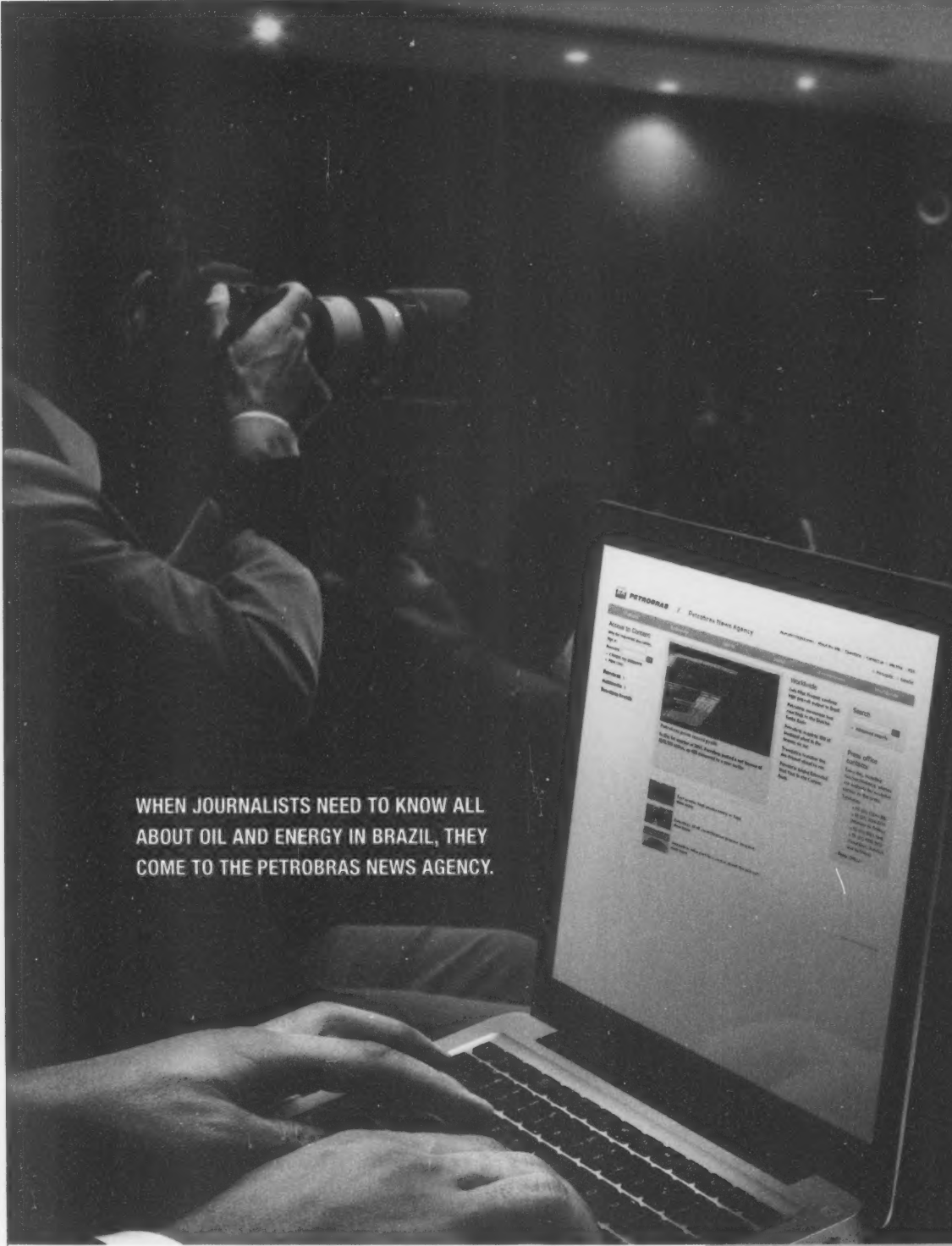
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# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

September/October 2011

"To assess the performance of journalism... to help stimulate continuing improvement in the profession, and to speak out for what is right, fair, and decent."

—from the founding editorial, 1961



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# Opening Shot

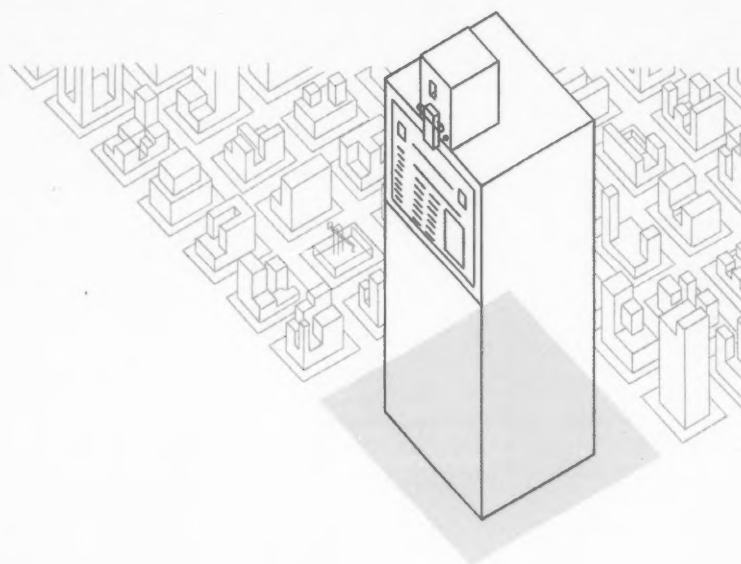


**F**our planes. One-hundred-and-two minutes of the towers smoking. Almost three thousand dead. Then, suddenly, it is ten years later, and we are still coming to terms with the events of September 11, 2001, while our country is more divided than it has been for years. Bin Laden is dead, but the specter of terrorism remains; our memories of that day demand vigilance, most likely forever. Our hopes, meanwhile, demand a more fruitful way to honor the victims: an evaluation of the other challenges to our common American project, which have only grown in the years since. Some, like lower expectations about what privacy and civil liberties mean in the United States, are the bitter fruit of that dark autumn. Others are related to budgets stretched by outlays for a military fighting at least two wars: infrastructure unrepaired or unbuilt, for example, and fraying compacts with vulnerable citizens—the elderly, the poor, the jobless. In the wake of the attacks, the press produced work that has reflected both its best and worst tendencies. Now it has a role to play in fostering a conversation premised on the sense of common cause that the attacks too briefly evoked. Look at the people in the picture. They are all of us. **CJR**

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## Deep impact

A crowd in lower Manhattan reacts as New York's World Trade Center burns. Two planes struck the complex, killing 2,750 people. Other planes crashed into the Pentagon and in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, killing 224.



## Size Matters

*News Corp.'s corruption would matter less if it weren't so big*

In the August 8 issue of *New York* magazine, the columnist Frank Rich suggests this takeaway from the News Corp. phone-hacking and bribery scandal: "An otherwise archetypal media colossus... is controlled by a family... that countenances the intimidation and silencing of politicians, regulators, competitors, journalists, and even ordinary citizens to maximize its profits and power and punish perceived corporate, political, and personal enemies."

It's true that the mafia-like corporate culture built by the Murdoch clan allows News Corp. to do or use just about anything to extend its profits and power. It's also true that the company's corruption found fertile ground in an equally out-of-control British tabloid culture.

But what is essentially a throwaway phrase in Rich's distillation—"archetypal media colossus"—is just as central as News Corp.'s thuggish disposition to understanding this story, in the UK and also here at home. News Corp.'s capacity to bully and silence comes directly from its size, from the number of media outlets it owns and the power those outlets create, economically and in terms of their ability to shape the public narrative about everything from political campaigns and policy debates to celebrity hijinks and summer blockbusters.

The deleterious effects of media consolidation—fewer voices, anemic newsrooms, self-censorship, etc.—have been argued since Ronald Reagan's Federal Communications Com-

mission began dismantling nearly a century of media regulation, touching off a thirty-year run of mergers and acquisitions that continues unabated.

In recent years, the case against consolidation has been tempered by the notion that digital technology has flattened the informational landscape, making everyone a potential publisher and thereby negating concerns about the fact that an ever shrinking number of companies controls an ever greater share of our news and information outlets.

But twenty years into the Internet era, most people still get most of their news—online, on-air, or in print—from the so-called legacy media, our newspapers, magazines, and TV news operations. Six companies dominate TV news, radio, online, movies, and publishing. Another eight or nine control most of the nation's newspapers. News Corp. is on both lists.

The phone-hacking scandal is a reminder that size still matters. It comes at an opportune time. In July, a federal appeals court rejected—on procedural grounds rather than on the merits—the FCC's attempt to further relax ownership restrictions and allow a single company to own a daily newspaper and a broadcast outlet in the same market.

We urge the FCC to retain the limit on cross ownership. It won't solve the problem of too much power in too few hands, but it would be an important first step. There is no reason to believe the other media giants would stoop to News Corp.'s depths of cynicism, but it is naive to assume they don't use their power in service of their corporate goals.

We also urge the commission to strengthen its public-interest standard. The obligation to provide programming that serves the public interest is part of the deal with broadcasters in exchange for the right to use the public's airwaves. Defining what it means to "serve the public interest" is controversial, but burying newsrooms inside sprawling entertainment empires and starving them of resources is not getting the job done, no matter how you define it. A report released this summer, "The Information Needs of Communities," authorized by the FCC itself, singles out the commission's utter failure to enforce the public-interest standard in its license-renewal process. In the past thirty years, not one license has been denied based on a broadcaster's failure to meet this standard.

The way to insure that good journalism flourishes is to establish structures that encourage it. A system that affords one company the power to abuse its competitors, the electoral process, and the public is not structurally sound. **CJR**

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**PBS: Where's the Beef?**

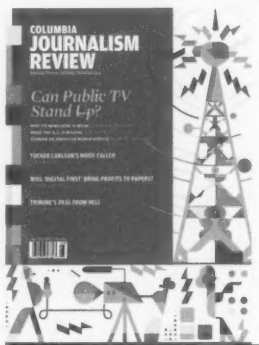
Elizabeth Jensen's story "Big Bird to the Rescue?" (CJR, July/August) in your cover package about the lack of local news on public television was well timed. Just as it was published, *New Jersey Network News*, what may have been the last fully field-produced local nightly news program in public television, aired its final broadcast after forty years.

Usually such efforts don't last nearly as long. Over the past forty years, there have been several noble efforts to produce high-quality local news programs on public television, from KQED's *Newsroom* to WNET's *The 51st State* to WGBH's *Ten O'Clock News*. But the programs were killed off, usually due to the management culture of local public television, a culture I observed when I was a reporter for several public radio and television stations in the 1970s and 1980s. In this culture field-produced local news is seen as a drain on station managers' ambitions for national production glory.

And that culture can induce some remarkable acts of greed. At one station I worked at, during an early-morning pledge drive, the station told young children that if mom and dad didn't send money, they might have to take away *Sesame Street*. (That's not an urban legend—I saw them do it. Twice.)

So what would happen across America if tomorrow almost all the local public television stations disappeared and only the transmitters were left operating? Nothing. It would be weeks, perhaps months—roughly around the time of the next pledge drive—before most "viewers like you" even noticed.

The typical local station is just a middleman. It takes the wholesale product—programs produced under the auspices of a few very large stations and PBS—and then "retails" it to viewers. But the "markup" is enormous: the cost of local personnel, studios, and equipment that produce almost nothing local aside from a weekly talking-head program perhaps



**The typical local station is a middleman. It takes the wholesale product and 'retails' it to viewers.**

and a special every six months about "the local arts scene."

A far wiser use of scarce funds would be to eliminate the middleman—shut down almost all local public television stations and use the money saved for a strong national public television service and to support local public radio and affiliated websites where there is enormous potential for real public service at relatively low cost.

Richard Wexler  
Alexandria, VA

Having spent over a decade as a senior officer at NPR observing the cultures of public radio and public television, I believe the articles on public television in

the July/August CJR miss a critical point. Few people realize that PBS is forbidden by its member stations from itself producing any broadcast programming. All broadcast content which it distributes must originate at, or be sponsored, by a member station. This rule selfishly protects the kingdoms of the local stations, ignores the interests of the public, and prohibits the aggregation at the national level of resources which could fund meaningful national news programming. Instead, each major producing public television station duplicates the infrastructure of the others, a profoundly inefficient way of doing business.

Because of this scandalous inefficiency, public television has only three significant national news programs. One is a solid but narrowly investigative program (*Frontline*, out of WGBH in Boston), another is a weak business news program (*The Nightly Business Report*, out of WPBT in Miami), and the *PBS NewsHour* (produced by a for-profit entity and sponsored by WETA in Washington) which has little real news, mostly relying for content on talking heads analyzing news reported by others. Thus, across all of public television, there is a deplorable lack of reportage.

Such a pitiful contribution by a public service broadcasting sector, whose budget is at least five times that of all of public radio, just can't be justified. By contrast NPR and other national program producers and distributors provide public-radio listeners with a rich diet of hard news, breaking news, international news, news analysis, cultural news, as well as investigatory news. So by any standard, on the news front, public television gets a failing grade.

The relationship of PBS and its stations must change before public television can effectively serve the public's interest in providing the best news programming. Public television stations must let PBS have the resources to produce top-notch news program-



ming, and then command that it do so. This in turn will free them to produce news programming where it is sorely needed—for their local communities.

Let public television's national component—PBS—focus on national service.  
*Neal Jackson*  
*Washington, DC*

### News for the Neighborhood

In his article "News for the World" (CJR, July/August), Lee Bollinger offers an interesting proposal—to create an American World (News) Service to absorb and supersede NPR, PBS, and the Voice of America. In theoretical terms, it has much to recommend it. We are pitifully far behind quite a few countries in such offerings.

World news in the San Francisco Bay Area provides a slightly different profile

from that he gives. In my Silicon Valley neighborhood, there is a significant reluctance to subscribe to cable (poor reception in some locales). An incidental benefit is that broader news and foreign-language offerings are available on digital TV, which has increased the number of public channels from three to ten over the past two years.

KCSM (San Mateo) holds the strongest hand for (non-US) world services. In addition to the BBC (recently forced to contract its world service) and PBS, its evening offerings also include Deutsche Welle (the go-to place for the Euro crisis), NHK World News (riveting coverage of the Sendai earthquake and its aftermath; excellent pan-Asian review on Thursdays), Al Jazeera (on-the-spot coverage of the Arab Spring), and Russia Today (nothing topical of

## NOTES FROM OUR ONLINE READERS

IN MID-JULY, WITH TEMPERATURES RISING AND THE ENTIRE CJR OFFICE dreaming of beach chairs and umbrella drinks, we asked our readers to help us compile a list of books that journalists might enjoy reading on their summer vacations. Here are a few of the titles you came up with:

*The Cruel Radiance* by Susie Linfield on photography and political violence. A fascinating study of the power of photography and some of the best photographers of war and disaster. —*Robin Lindley*

If you have not read *Towards the End of the Morning* by Michael Frayn, you should. A hilarious look at Fleet Street in the late 1960s. —*Jim Kelly*

For anyone interested in data-driven journalism, the classic *Precision Journalism* by Pulitzer-winning Philip Meyer, the just-out *Visualize This* by Nathan Yau of the Flowing Data blog, on the grounds that graphical analysis is central both to exploratory data analysis and communicating the results to your audience, and *The Tiger That Isn't* by Michael Blastland and Andrew Dilnot. The last is an entertaining run through the use and abuse of statistics in politics and journalism. —*Peter Aldhous*

Norman Mailer's *Executioner's Song* to me is the high water mark of the New Journalism and Mailer's best work. Needs to be read in one fell swoop for maximum effect. Great beach read. —*T. Jackson*

*Blood River* by Tim Butcher of *The Daily Telegraph*. So you considered yourself on the intrepid side did you? This tale will make even the most seasoned scribe-against-the-odds fancier blanche. Excellent backdrop too on Congolese history. —*Christopher Potter*

*Late Edition: A Love Story* by Bob Greene, wonderfully rich, detailed, bittersweet memoir of the old days at an Ohio newspaper, with a newsroom full of characters, decades ago when people depended foremost on print, very familiar to me breaking into journalism with the *Providence Journal* in the 1960s. —*M. Charles Bakst*

David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*, not least for the hope that the scraps around your desk may one day be turned into art. —*Stephen Murray*

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— *Alicia Wallace*, reporter, Boulder Daily Camera, and 2011 Strictly Financials Seminar Fellow

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

TWO REDESIGNS AGO, IN 2004, THE COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW launched a back-of-the-book feature called Second Read that has proved immensely successful. The idea was to ask journalists to look back at books that moved and shaped them. For our very first Second Read, the historian Rick Perlstein reread a favorite of his, the late Paul Cowan's book, *The Tribes of America*. Thirty years earlier, in 1974, Cowan had set out to write about a howling mob of Christian fundamentalists furious at the use of "blasphemous" books in the public schools in their corner of West Virginia. When the county school board rejected their demands and kept the books in the curriculum, somebody took out a wing of the school board building with fifteen sticks of dynamite. Boom.

*The Village Voice* sent Cowan, a scruffy, longhaired New York Jew, to cover the story. You might think his take would have been fairly predictable. But you would have been wrong. Cowan produced a subtle and sympathetic account of the terrible frustrations of people on the losing end of a class war, people who felt their culture was under unrelenting attack by cosmopolitans from a very different corner of the county. That story launched Cowan on a series of explorations into America's culture wars that would become *The Tribes of America*. Cowan's book inspired, among others, the young Rick Perlstein. And when Perlstein got a chance to write about it for CJR, his essay helped bring *Tribes of America* back into print. A virtuous circle.

Since 2004, our Second Reads have traveled across time and geography—to World War II, for example, in Michael Shapiro's lyrical tribute to the reporting of Cornelius Ryan for *The Longest Day*; to South America, where Miles Corwin showcased Gabriel Garcia Marquez's powerful early journalism in *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*; to the Great Depression, where Claire Dederer introduced CJR readers to a wise and almost cheerful perspective on it from Betty MacDonald and her *Anybody Can Do Anything*; even to pre-history, as Douglas McCollam rereads John McPhee's timeless *Annals of the Former World*. On page 50 of this issue comes our latest installment of Second Read. This time, Jeffrey Gregg writes about four volumes of interviews and essays from Victorian England—Henry Mayhew's remarkable *London Labour and the London Poor*, which brought to his middle- and upper-class readers the lives of the poor in London, as unknown to them as life on the other side of the world, and each life unique and sharply etched.

And now, we are proud to announce, comes a collection of some of the best of Second Read: great modern writers like Nicholson Baker, Ted Conover, Connie Schultz, Jack Shafer, and Scott Sherman reflecting on works by classic writers like Daniel Defoe, Michael Herr, Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, and Rachel Carson. The book is called, naturally enough, *Second Read: Writers Look Back at Classic Works of Reportage*. It is the first effort in a new series of CJR books, to be published by Columbia University Press, and about which you will hear more later. James Marcus edited *Second Read* and wrote its lovely preface; Marcus, the deputy editor of *Harper's Magazine*, was CJR's editor at large between 2007 and 2010, and brought in many terrific Second Reads. John Palattella, the literary editor of *The Nation*, edited CJR's Ideas & Reviews section before him. That work is done now by Justin Peters, our managing editor/web. Justin also writes, beautifully, and *Second Read* features one of his own essays, a lively piece about Peter Fleming's hilarious *Brazilian Adventure*. *Second Read* will be available in bookstores in November, but can be pre-ordered today from your local bookstore, or from Amazon, BN.com, or another online retailer.

Speaking of ordering, this is a good time to get somebody a gift subscription to the *Columbia Journalism Review* or to get or renew your own. The issue after this one will start our fiftieth anniversary celebration, and you don't want to miss it. You can subscribe to the print or the digital edition, or both, at [cjr.org/subscriptions](http://cjr.org/subscriptions), or call 888-425-7782.

—Mike Hoyt

note) on weekdays. A local commercial channel carries CCTV and Xinhua News.

Given the will of Congress and the well-publicized collapse of foreign-language teaching in many US institutions of higher learning, it is hard to see how the US could marshal the resources to mount a competitive world service in the foreseeable future. The percentage of funding that PBS receives from government resources is minuscule. One would need to start from scratch. NPR gives a whole different slant to the news and sustains a much broader array of one-off features capturing real life in America.

What is more conspicuously missing in the Bay Area (and much of the rest of the US) is coverage of local and state government news of any merit. Sound-bite TV journalism, given its obsessions with police blotters, gay rights, and presidential sweepstakes, robs us of any knowledge of budgetary, legislative, educational, and environmental issues in Sacramento and in our local communities. The collapse of in-depth reporting, and of newspaper reading as a daily habit of the educated, doom us to poorly drafted, self-serving legislation at every level of government. Were I in a position to choose between a US-branded world service and beefed-up state and local coverage, I would opt for the latter.

Eleanor Field

Comment posted on CJR.org

### Bad Bet

"John Paton's Big Bet" by Lauren Kirchner (CJR, July/August) is a bold illustration of the struggle that newspapers face. But it is a far cry from the sober, responsible writing that is the hallmark of the *Columbia Journalism Review*. Paton, the publisher of the recently out-of-bankruptcy Journal Register Company, has undertaken a survival/growth plan that may be fit for a media company at the bottom of the heap, but it is hardly an example for aspiring journalists. The article is full of statistical hocus pocus that is, unfortunately, prevalent in much of recent writing about the brave new world of digital. Paton's idea is that income from digital will make up the loss of revenue from the traditional print editions. But the statistics, mostly in comparative percentages without re-

lated dollar figures, are not convincing. More disturbing is Paton's prescription for replacing traditional professional writing with writing from unpaid or low-paid outside contributors.

*Henry Meininger*  
Editor and publisher  
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Austerlitz, NY

#### What About Us?

The disconnect CJR writes about in its September/October editorial I see regularly in the *New York Times's* news articles and business reports—both factual and analytical disconnects. Social Security-only folks are seldom mentioned in detail. People earning \$25K to \$50K seldom fit in their reports. They can't be included simply because they can't afford the items the reporter talks about. Recently, CNN talked with senior women on Social Security but they were from Palm Springs. Poor? The only "poor" one received her Social Security and worked thirty-six hours a week. Our politicians, including President Obama, also don't get down to the nitty-gritty of the low middle class or poor, perhaps because they haven't experienced true poverty. The same goes for most reporters. We need more of them to care about the lives of the poor and bring their stories into our nation's conscience.

*Patricia Wilson*  
San Jose, CA

#### Correction

In Nathan Deuel's story, "Life Near the Center of the Story" (CJR, July/August), about freelance journalists living in Istanbul, we misspelled Monique Jaques's name. We apologize.

#### Clarification

Elizabeth Jensen's piece about the weak news culture of public television, "Big Bird to the Rescue?" (CJR, July/August), reported that the *PBS NewsHour* "never paid local stations even a nominal fee for content." While Jensen was referring to payments to local stations for local work as a way of encouraging local coverage, it is worth noting that the *PBS NewsHour* did base reporters at a handful of local public stations between 1984 and 2008, and used their work on the program. **CJR**

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# Currents



## Local (Wiki)Leaks

Like any digital-age enterprise reporter, I scan certain online databases as a matter of daily routine: local campaign-finance and lobbyist disclosures, hazardous spill alerts, and federal court filings. My new favorite? WikiLeaks's diplomatic-cable dump. ¶ On November 28, 2010, WikiLeaks began publishing the largest secret document leak in history—251,287 US State Department cables in a slow, even trickle. The event birthed whole galaxies of news stories, and with the larger media outlets in perpetual orbit around Planet Assange, the global press is left to comb through the rest. I say global rather than foreign press or

international press because ultimately it's up to local reporters, domestically and abroad, to identify the relevance of each cable and chase down the leads they offer. The cable dump has been mostly treated as an international story, but I find it offers intriguing local stories for me and my alt-weekly paper, the *San Diego CityBeat*. Here's a sampling:

- After a cable revealed details of the extravagant wedding of the son of a Dagestani politician, Russian reporters questioned the senator about the cable's

claim that he owned multiple homes and luxury cars around the world, including in San Diego. He denied it. Yet, with a little legwork I discovered that not only did he own stakes in four properties here (plus a Rolls-Royce), but also that his business partners were oil-executive cronies, including a local financier currently on the lam and facing tax-evasion charges.

- Many of the cables include accounts of private discussions between foreign leaders and congressional delegations. Locally, cables indicated that Representative Darrell Issa lobbied in Finland on behalf of pharmaceutical and nuclear-energy interests, two industries that have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to his election campaigns in northern San Diego County. The cables also illustrated the Lebanese-American congressman's commitment to his roots: in most meetings with Middle Eastern leaders, Issa spoke up for Lebanon, particularly with regard to the nation's conflicts with Syria and Israel.

- A dark and in-depth cable about corruption, abject poverty, and near anarchy in southern Italy included details of how the US consulate was promoting a San Diego energy company's plan to help solve the region's trash and energy crises by turning garbage into natural gas. What was especially interesting: Italian officials indicated it would be nearly

**'I think at the end of a week, in which the press has had a bit of a hammering and the reputation of journalists has been so tarnished, we should remember that it was a journalist who brought this all out into the open.'** —Alan Rusbridger, the *Guardian's* editor, at the height of the *News of the World* scandal

impossible to do business in the region without "paying extortion or collaborating with the 'Ndrangheta," one of Europe's largest crime syndicates.

• San Diego frequently appears in cables about cartel violence and drug trafficking. One memo indicated that county residents were the prime suspects in a shooting attack on a Tijuana peace activist. Another cable revealed a cartel plot to assassinate DEA agents; one of the plotters was an allegedly corrupt Mexican police officer who received sniper training from the San Diego County Sheriff's office.

I've produced eight stories using twelve of the sixteen thousand cables published so far. At that rate, to quote some back-of-the-envelope algebra, I may write more than 120 pieces before the cache is depleted. Of course, WikiLeaks could be releasing the best ones first, saving the inconsequential for the end—I'll still be checking every day.

It helps that San Diego is both a port city and a border city. But, with a quarter-million cables to sift through, reporters deep in the heartland could use sites like cablesearch.org and cable-gatesearch.net to find local threads that connect to a web of international intrigue. The think-globally-report-locally paradigm has become as simple as doing a keyword search every morning over coffee.

—Dave Maass

## Haven Bound

*IN 2008, ICELAND WAS HIT hard by the global financial crisis. Citizen outrage and political unrest followed, sparking a people-powered shift in government policies. In June of 2010, the parliament passed the Icelandic Modern Media Initiative (IMMI), a resolution to draft the world's strongest free speech protections. Then, this spring, the government began crowdsourcing a new constitution online, and produced a draft in late July. Alysia Santo spoke with Birgitta Jónsdóttir, a member of parliament and a one-time WikiLeaks spokesperson, about her goals to transform Iceland into a haven for freedom of speech and transparency. A longer version of their conversation is available at [cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/haven\\_bound.php](http://cjr.org/behind_the_news/haven_bound.php).*

**You have said that journalists are information refugees.**

We're hoping to make Iceland into a place where if you take the chance to blow the whistle, your story is going to appear. My driving force is bloggers in countries like China, Tibet, Sri Lanka, and others. They are risking their lives to tell us what's really going on. I want to be able to provide them safe haven.

**How does this fit into the Icelandic government's crowdsourcing of the constitution?**

One of the demands during the protests was to revise the constitution; 950 people were randomly selected from



the national registry to participate in the constitutional assembly. Then it was made available for suggestions through Facebook, ordinary e-mail, or mail, and it's viewable by everyone. There is not a particular policy about transparent government, but it's the overall spirit in everything we're doing.

**Last June, when you first presented IMMI, what were your expectations?**

I didn't expect the entire parliament to say yes, including the governor. I was overwhelmed. It's been a little slower than I hoped, but we passed the source protection law this spring and we're working on a freedom of information act that should pass in September. In times of crisis, damaging emergency laws are pushed

## HARD NUMBERS

**109** number of segments CNN aired on the News Corp. phone-hacking scandal, July 4-13

**71** number of segments aired on MSNBC

**30** number of segments aired on News Corp.-owned Fox News

**1,200** number of retail locations operated by Borders in 2003

**399** number of Borders stores that remained in July 2011, when the company announced it would cease operations

**160** percent rise in e-reader sales during the first five months of 2011

**61** percent of nonprofit news sites that list funders who, in turn, do not reveal where their money comes from

**982,000** average number of viewers of June primetime broadcasts on HLN, which adopted the tagline "Justice for Caylee" for its coverage of the Casey Anthony trial

**592,000** average number of primetime viewers of HLN during June 2010

**281,000** number of readers who purchased digital subscriptions to *The New York Times* in the second quarter of 2011

**2.6** percent rise in the *Times's* digital ad revenue during the quarter

**6.4** percent drop in the *Times's* print ad revenue

Sources: Media Matters, Borders, Project for Excellence in Journalism, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The New York Times*, Association of American Publishers



through and tend to stick. We wanted to use this same time frame to create good. If we wanted to start a tax haven, we would look at all the best laws around the world in order to create secrecy. We did the same thing, but for transparency. The laws that are the backbone of IMMI are history protection from France; source protection from Belgium; freedom of information from Norway, Estonia, and Sweden; libel tourism from the states of Florida, California, and New York; communication protection from Norway; and the whistleblowing laws were from the United States—but those laws have proven too weak under political pressure, so we're looking at other countries for laws that function the way they were meant to.

**You're trying to get the rest of Europe to adopt these laws. How has the reaction been from the EU?**

Very positive. Many members of the European parliament have suggested using Iceland as a standard for upgrading laws into the reality we're living in, where information doesn't have borders. We're seeing this freedom of information movement develop through legal means and through what WikiLeaks and others are doing.

**At some point Iceland wants to start awarding an Icelandic prize for freedom of expression.**

Yeah. We feel that it would be wrong to start the award, to puff our chest, before we have the proper shields. We want to make sure that we can protect the journalist or whistleblower that we would award. That will be the cherry on top. **CJR**

## NEWS FRONTIER THE POWER OF ONE

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ENTRY BARRIERS ARE LOW IN THE ONLINE NEWS WORLD. Cheap hosting and free templates have launched a million blogs, including some where a single person, calling himself "Gazette" or "Bugle" or "Wire" or what have you, masquerades as a full-on news publication.

Most often, such sites are hardly worthy of attention—there's at least one that lists the owner's cats as part of the editorial team—but some are far more professional. A single journalist writing by day and handling business by night could seem like the industry's long-awaited low point, but if it is, it's one where a hardy few have thrived. So far, there are twelve in CJR's News Frontier Database of more than 150 noteworthy online news sites.

A single-journalist publication is the ultimate in low overhead, so it's not surprising that large corporations have entered the field. In January, the NFDB profiled DoDBuzz, a one-man shop that, astoundingly, is able to provide strong coverage of Department of Defense weapons acquisitions. At the time, it was run by Colin Clark, a self-described "start-up expert" and veteran journalist who built DoDBuzz for Military.com, a division of Monster.com. Before that, Clark had founded Washington AeroSpace Briefing, another one-man operation, for web-content monolith Imaginova. He has since left to run the team at AOL Defense as its founding editor, but he credits his days in the one-person news world for teaching him how to hone a vision for a small publication.

One unequivocally good thing about a single worker shop is that it can do important work in niches that may be far too narrow to support a staff of, well, two. Shmarya Rosenberg is a former rabbinical student whose news site, FailedMessiah.com, investigates the insular world of ultra-orthodox Judaism. With about five-hundred thousand monthly page views, it has been, as the site's NFDB profile explains, "instrumental in bringing scandals and controversies from within ultra-orthodoxy to the secular world's attention."

FailedMessiah.com is unincorporated. But Portland Afoot, a one-man site covering "low car" life, is a full-fledged nonprofit with a board of directors. I spoke with Michael Andersen, the sole journalist behind the site, just before he dashed out the door to attend his first annual fundraiser. "That's my life," he said. "It's a lot of running around, a lot of changing modes rapidly from editorial to marketing to fundraising to advertising. And I'm pretty bad at, like, three of those things—but I can do all of them." He said that the biggest advantage to working solo, besides not having to be anyone's manager, is the "unity of vision." Even the biggest newsroom can't beat one journalist at that.

—Michael Meyer

## LANGUAGE CORNER GOING STRAIT

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WHEN TWO WORDS SOUND THE SAME AND HAVE SIMILAR MEANINGS, YOU KNOW THEY'RE going to merge eventually. But until they do, it's important to keep the differences "straight." The men in white coats coming to take you away are carrying "straitjackets" because you are in "dire straits." If you think of the "Strait" of Gibraltar, it's easier to remember that the adjective "strait" means "narrow" or "constricting." Another meaning is "distressed."

"Straight," on the other hand, means "without curves," "unbending," and things related. "Unbending" can also mean "narrow," as in "She's unbending in her opposition to same-sex marriage," so you can see why people would mistakenly write "straightjackets" or "dire straights," the British rock band's spelling notwithstanding. "Straightjacket" has appeared enough that it's now considered a variant spelling, a step up from "don't ever use it." But maintaining the "constricting" sense emphasizes the nature of the garment.

Then there's "straitlaced." *The Associated Press Stylebook* allows both "strait-laced" (the hyphenated version is the more usual spelling) and "straight-laced," but for different meanings: "Use *strait-laced* for someone strict or severe in behavior or moral views. Reserve *straight-laced* for the notion of confinement, as in a corset." So although the person has "narrow" views, she's "straight," not "strait." Most dictionaries list "straight-laced" as a variant spelling, not a variant meaning. That puts the AP, often "straight-laced" in its own views, ahead of the curve.

—Merrill Perlman

PETER HOEV



## LAUREL



For much of his career, the British journalist Andrew MacGregor Marshall has covered Southeast Asia for Thomson Reuters. During that time, he developed a particular fondness for Thailand, learning the language and falling for the “warmth and joie de vivre of the Thai people.” From 2000 to 2002, he was deputy chief of the wire’s Bangkok bureau, and in the years since he returned often, from his base in Singapore, to write about the political and social turmoil that roils the kingdom.

In June, though, Marshall quit Thomson Reuters after seventeen years to publish a three-hundred-plus-page story—on the Internet, for free—that has made him a wanted man in his beloved Thailand and will likely prevent him from safely returning there for years. “People thought I was crazy,” says Marshall, not to be confused with the Andrew Marshall who is *Time*’s Southeast Asia correspondent. “They probably still think I’m crazy.”

There is, however, a method to Marshall’s madness. He had grown increasingly frustrated at his inability, and that of journalism generally, to tell the full and honest story of the kingdom’s ongoing political crisis, which at its core is about the unspoken role the monarchy plays in the politics of a country that claims to be a free and functioning democracy. This crisis produced a military coup in 2006, and street protests and occasional violence ever since.

Thailand is a country that runs on rumor, due to a chilling trifecta of laws: defamation, the computer crimes act, and a draconian *lèse majesté* law that makes it illegal to insult the monarchy. Together, they criminalize essentially all candid public discussion of politics and power in the kingdom and make serious reporting all but impossible. (I ran afoul of Thai press laws, too, in 2009, and had to flee the country. You can read my story at [cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/fry\\_in\\_thailand.php](http://cjr.org/behind_the_news/fry_in_thailand.php).) Marshall calls Thailand a country of secrets and describes reporting there as an exercise in taking “baby steps” towards truth.

That changed dramatically for him in March, when Reuters gained access to the trove of 250,000 secret US diplomatic cables that WikiLeaks dumped on the world in November 2010. Marshall homed in on the three thousand cables that pertained to Thailand, which the rest of the journalism world had mostly ignored. “The cables went far beyond baby steps,” he says. “They just ripped everything wide open.”

He knew he had a story that Reuters would never publish, and that he would need to leave the company to write. (Reuters has publicly stated that it could not publish the work

because of “questions regarding length, sourcing, objectivity, and legal issues.”) Marshall left with copies of the cables—the cache from Thailand, but other countries too—a decision that strained his relationship with Reuters, but which he justifies as being in the spirit of the information and transparency. “I never wanted to put my colleagues in danger,” he says. “I was doing it because I believed in journalism and that I could do some good.”

Marshall published his work, entitled “Thailand’s Moment of Truth: A Secret History of 21st Century Siam,” in three parts between June and August. It draws largely on these cables, complemented by his own reporting. It offers an account of Thailand’s recent troubles that is unprecedented in its scope and candor, reaching back through the country’s history to provide insight into the current situation. Marshall dissects the messy political and royal dynamics. He depicts the kingdom in the throes of a behind-the-scenes power struggle and succession crisis that continues to mount as the much-revered but ailing King Bhumibol fades from relevance in a Bangkok hospital.

According to the cables, King Bhumibol, who has spent the past two years in the hospital for mysterious but reportedly unserious reasons, suffers from Parkinson’s disease and depression. The cables suggest he is largely estranged from his wife, the Queen, who has assumed his power and, with a coterie of loyal military officers, become the real force in Thai politics—“the invisible hand” that orchestrated the 2006 coup, the paramilitary build-up in Thailand’s south, and the “yellow shirt” protest movement against former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Meanwhile, Bhumibol’s heir, the Crown Prince, who is regarded by most Thais as a loathsome playboy, comes across in the cables as exactly that. His dog, Foo Foo—who is also officially a Thai Air Marshall—laps at the US ambassador’s plate in one memorable scene.

Thai censors have blocked Marshall’s piece, but that hasn’t stopped Thais, who have grown adept at circumventing digital barriers, from reading it. After posting part one on his website, [zenjournalist.com](http://zenjournalist.com), in June, he picked up thousands of Twitter followers and Facebook friends, mostly young Thais, overnight. His site had 250,000 hits in its first month. Meanwhile, a group of Thais—on their own initiative, and not without some personal risk—are translating it and have created a site, [thaistory.blog](http://thaistory.blog), to host the content and discussion.

Marshall says he will publish a similar treatment of the cache of cables from Burma next, and hopes to remain solvent by doing political-risk consulting (the cables are useful for that, too). He deserves a **LAUREL** for creating, at great personal and professional cost, a detailed public record of power politics and their consequences in a country where information and honest debate have long been suppressed. **CJR**

## The Long Tale

*New homes for stories that fall between a book and an article*

WHEN AUTHOR JON KRAKAUER STARTED LOOKING INTO THE ALTRUISTIC CLAIMS of his former friend, the best-selling author of *Three Cups of Tea*, Greg Mortenson, he uncovered quite a story. Mortenson was famous as a philanthropist who raised millions for his charity, which builds schools and other resources in Afghanistan. But the more Krakauer investigated, the more Mortenson's generosity seemed like mismanagement or embezzlement. It was ultimately a story that was darker than a glass of oolong.

In 2010, Krakauer went to *60 Minutes* with his findings. As is typical for television, the show was slow to get his story on the air and then some of the sources who talked to him were not comfortable appearing on camera. So Krakauer decided to write about Mortenson himself. He was advised to take it to *The New Yorker*.

But at that point, the piece ran ten thousand words and soon would become a twenty-three-thousand-word tale of treachery and greed. Krakauer was well known and best-selling, yet he nonetheless faced a dilemma that snares many journalists and nonfiction authors: Where do long pieces and essays go, given that magazines are publishing shorter and shorter pieces? It was unlikely that a magazine, even *The New Yorker*, would run a piece as long as this, at least promptly, even by a journalist as famous as Krakauer. It was equally hard to get booklet-length works published as conventional books on paper—they are too short for the seventy-five thousand words typically required. And then, even if Krakauer had published it as a book, it would take months, perhaps a year, to hit bookstores. Krakauer had news to break, and sooner than traditional publishing would allow.

He mentioned the story to his former editor at *Outside* magazine, Mark Bryant, who had been talking up a new e-book venture, Byliner Originals (Bryant is the editorial director and co-founder of the company). Byliner was planning to publish narrative nonfiction for e-readers that was somewhere between an article and a book, between ten thousand and thirty-five thousand words, through Kindle and the Byliner website, for less than \$6. According to Bryant, Krakauer quickly decided to have the new web publisher put out his Mortenson takedown, *Three Cups of Deceit*. Krakauer's e-book/essay wound up number one on Amazon's nonfiction list in April. (In the middle of July, it was down to a still very respectable number 286 on the list of paid best-sellers for all of Amazon's Kindle Store, a list that includes the game *Yahtzee*.)

In May, Byliner released its second work, *Into the Forbidden Zone*, a twenty-thousand-word gonzo account of post-tsunami Japan by William T. Vollman. Bryant and Byliner founder Jon Tayman are a little cagey about how much writers

like Vollman get paid—they say assignment fees are “competitive” and royalties are divided in a fifty-fifty revenue split. Other works that are in development include an essay-book by Anthony Swofford, the author of *Jarhead*, along with efforts by more than twenty-five other writers, including Mark Bittman and Mary Roach. Bryant believes that “readers don’t suffer from having too much to read but from having a hard time finding what to read.”

Byliner isn't the only outfit counting on readers' appetite for true stories online that are longer than articles and shorter than books. New platforms featuring heavily reported pieces are emerging faster than pop-up restaurants. In January of this year, *The Atavist*, run by *Wired* alum Evan Ratliff, also opened shop. Ratliff's own *Atavist* piece, *Lifted*, about a Swedish bank robbery, had made the Amazon best-seller list. Ratliff hopes to position *The Atavist* so that the publisher will be “the first line of getting book proposals that are not quite books.” Ultimately, he hopes to collaborate with traditional publishers. (Editors' note: please see the disclosure in the bio box.)

There are other new places where the long article-cum-short book has a chance. Sites like Longform.org and Longreads.com are compiling richer and more thorough stories, and Byliner's own website, Byliner.com, is updated daily with summaries and links to liter-



**In between** The 'normal' lengths of cultural products were initially determined not by tastes but by technology.

ary nonfiction works, some published decades ago, available for free. The site currently points readers to more than ten thousand stories. Bryant describes Byliner.com as "curatorial," to use the phrase du jour, as the site guides users toward worthy long-form material. It links to sites where the pieces are already available, or to pieces that authors have asked it to include. The owners talk about it as a "discovery engine" for finding authors you like, sort of like Pandora finds music. The site is also, of course, a distribution platform for Byliner Originals and generates a small amount of money when a user buys a book off of the Byliner site on Amazon. Eventually, the plan is to pursue advertising and sponsorship opportunities. But Byliner has other sources of funding, including an angel investor, says Bryant, a "social media Silicon Valley person."

Perhaps the biggest entry into the field is Kindle Singles, Amazon's own

platform for some of these essay-books, as well as those from other publishers. They may be read on any of the Kindle platforms and are priced from \$1 to \$5. Kindle Singles seems the best evidence that there is a market for this type of work—Amazon must have done its homework. While Kindle is strict about disclosing sales figures or letting publishers like Byliner disclose figures, plenty of Singles have been doing well. The Krakauer Single—a best-seller for all of Amazon, digital and print, was downloaded for free seventy thousand times in the seventy-two hours after it was first released, before Kindle started charging for downloads, and Bryant says they sold a number comparable to that immediately thereafter. Sarah Gelman, an Amazon spokeswoman, says seven Kindle Singles titles—including Krakauer's—have broken into the top twenty bestselling titles in the Kindle store, which includes all Kindle books.

Twenty-one of the seventy-five Kindle Singles published so far have been in the top one hundred Kindle best-sellers.

IF THESE E-BOOKLETS HAVE A GENRE antecedent, it might be the musical EP, a recording that's longer than a single but too short for a full LP. Byliner's Tayman believes that the "decoupling" of the very long piece from the magazine or the book is parallel to what has happened in music, where individual songs now sell rather than albums, or what happens to television series now that Netflix or iTunes allow you to watch individual episodes of, say, the British series *Downton Abbey*, rather than having to wait for the boxed set. It's part of our new world, where complete sets are deconstructed, leaving us with stories or songs we want to enjoy individually. After all, "normal" lengths of cultural products, from books to articles to albums to the three-minute pop song,

were initially determined not by tastes but by technology. Three minutes was what could most easily fit on a gramophone disc, due to the thickness of record players' needles at the time, and the small number of grooves possible on a single's surface. (*Hey Jude* was one of the songs to show record companies that three minutes wasn't a law of physics.) In the case of journalism, thousand-word pieces are not in human DNA and neither are four-hundred-page reported books; they were in the pre-digital marketplace's DNA, though.

The new booklets are not just about breaking down traditional forms, however. They are also about publishing writing that is shorter than long. This makes sense to me from a marketing and reading perspective: Why commit to a long film or a long book that maybe should have been short to begin with?

But it works the other way, as well. Some readers want more than what a traditional magazine article provides.

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## A bet of the heart that people want long-form writing.

With infinite digital space available, why buy into the conventional wisdom that articles have to be shorter?

Either way, as far as new publishers like Ratliff are concerned, many contemporary nonfiction books might as well be published at thirty or a hundred and thirty pages rather than three hundred pages. And think of the hours of our lives we could have not wasted and the guilt about not reading we could have been spared if the page-length convention for books was removed?

I WAS RELIEVED TO HEAR ABOUT THESE new mini-enterprises for my own reasons. For one thing, they made me feel a little less messianic and oh-so-alone in my tastes. For years, I had rabbited on to whomever would listen about how we need to save long-form writing and the reported essay before it went the way of the LP or Aramaic. ProPublica and

other nonprofits were supporting some longer investigative pieces but that didn't include writerly features. This kind of writing seemed slated to become the cultural equivalent of poetry—quaint.

Byliner presents itself as a believer in sensibility and the lost Golden Age of the endless magazine piece, a period that ended in the late 1990s, partly because Tayman had been a long-time magazine writer and editor, including a stint at *Outside* in its literary heyday. Like many journalists, Tayman realized two years ago that the stories he wanted to produce as a writer weren't suited to the "traditional publishing systems," as he puts it. "Selfishly, as a writer, I wanted something that fell between magazines and books."

For Ratliff of *The Atavist*, the idea for long-form web publishing started when he, too, realized how difficult it was to place a story longer than five thousand words. In the fall of 2009, he started building the site, and by the time he was well into its development, Amazon announced Kindle Singles. Ratliff got in touch with them. He called his press *The Atavist* because he owned that domain and also because he liked the word's meaning: to take something from an earlier era and revive it (he says it also helped that the name would be easy to find in app stores). Two of *The Atavist*'s titles have sold very well and the rest reasonably so, but the enterprise has been surviving and beginning to expand as it adds a new revenue stream—licensing fees. While the Kindle Singles version of their books cost \$1.99, the "enhanced version" that costs \$2.99 contains videos, timelines, music files, etc. The software that produces those versions has caught the imagination of an old-fashioned textbook company, which is licensing it from *The Atavist*. Combined with respectable e-book sales figures, it's enough income for *The Atavist* to open an actual office in a building full of freelancers in Brooklyn.

A few older off-line publishers mine the same in-between genre of nonfiction as the new e-booklet vendors. In Australia, *The Quarterly Essay* is a premiere publication for that nation's intellectuals. Each issue contains a single essay. In England, there's the *Big Idea* book series, which pairs an intellectual with a big concept like "bodies" in an essay-

book format. In the US, one of the better examples is the 33 1/3 book series of music criticism, in which, for one example, a single slim volume of cerebral prose was devoted to Celine Dion. Another is publisher Soft Skull's *Deep Focus* series of very short essay-books, in which a writer devotes himself to a single film. None of these publications is a big seller by conventional publishing standards, but all have cult followings.

The long-article/short-book publisher with the most sales possibilities is Kindle Singles itself, which launched in January. They "can be twice the length of a *New Yorker* feature or as much as a few chapters of a typical book," in Kindle Single's promotional parlance. As Sarah Gelman from Amazon, the publisher of Singles, says, Kindle Singles is looking for little books on "something news-related like Christopher Hitchens's *The Enemy*"—booklets that are "quick to market." "Hitchens's piece on Bin Laden's death"—a best-selling Kindle Single—"was published two weeks after the president's announcement," says Gelman, "when the public's interest in this event was piqued."

Byliner is also basing its Singles on newsworthy topics. "The Vollman story came about because we have regular editorial meetings where we think about what's going on out there," says Tayman. "We thought of John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. What if we could tell the story of what life in that evacuation zone was like? We reached out to Bill"—William Vollman—"and in two weeks he turned around that story. It was in front of readers within ten days of his plane landing back in the US." In other words, the book was edited and formatted in ten days, not the year between editing and publication that tend to weigh down and periodize works produced by legacy publishers.

I WANTED TO BELIEVE IN EACH ENTHUSIASTIC exchange with these publishers. As I trolled looking for further mention of serious, shorter-than-book-length nonfiction online, I started to see a pattern, like many a trend writer before me. Suddenly, there seemed to be a rash of academic conferences devoted to the substantial essay. One in July in London was dedicated to the literary essay, and there's another in October in New York,



at Fordham. The London conference's promotional literature bemoaned contemporary publishers, who would never have run the work of the great early nineteenth-century British essayists William Hazlitt or Charles Lamb. Both of those writers defined the experiential essay, creating a fashion for them. For instance, one of Hazlitt's most famous personal essays was about watching a fight.

Of course, an increased interest in the history and a new sense of the value of the long reported piece are not the same thing as an audience that will buy the stuff. Is there, or will there be, sustained appetite for long, true stories on the web? Or will the only true successes be those of old media megastars like Krakauer, who just happened to be publishing a crackling revenge tragedy involving another famous older writer?

One reason to bet against Byliner et al is that magazines bundle together a range of pieces. The "good" pieces—often the ones that don't make "most e-mailed" lists—are shored up by the more digestible articles, in a single issue of a magazine. Stand-alone singles will have to rise and fall on their own popularity.

Are enough people eager to read well-written yarns when nonfiction is not selling so well generally? When so many of us come home tired of reading the Internet all day at work? I think the answer is yes. I believe the best of these enterprises will succeed, that this work will find an audience and has an audience. I can't prove it—it's a bet of the heart.

For years, traditional publishers have been notoriously contemptuous of essay collections, short-story collections, and even novellas (by anyone except Philip Roth!). Long-short form/short-long form doesn't sell, they say. The sales numbers behind some of these singles would seem to at least begin to prove them wrong. The people who are taking chances with new forms and lengths are more likely to succeed than the ones who are pushing old formats and forms that readers are turning away from. Better to double-down on the singles. **CJR**

ALISSA QUART is a contributing editor to *CJR*. Full disclosure: after she completed this story, Quart was invited to apply for a job at *The Atavist* and subsequently landed it. She starts in September.

## GUATEMALA POSTCARD CONNOR BOALS

### *Pirate Radio, Mayan Style*

*Indigenous stations want to come in from the cold*

WHEN YOU GET TO SUMPANGO, IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS OF GUATEMALA, you won't be able to find Radio Ixchel on your own. This is partially by design: in the eyes of the law, they are running a criminal operation.

There's no sign posted outside the building that houses the station. Other than the indiscreet donation box by the window, this looks like the entrance to someone's home. Inside is a dusty, open courtyard where chickens peck at scraps and an ornery goose honks.

Angélica Cubur Sul opens the door to the studio, clad in a traditional Mayan multicolored blouse. She's a "locutora" here at the station. You could call her a DJ, but she does much more. Inside, another woman runs the mixer as a Mayan herbalist provides instructions in Kaqchikel, the local dialect, on what local flora listeners can use to treat indigestion. The door is thin and the goose is still honking outside. Sul taps out a script on an ancient PC for her top-of-the-hour newscast.

Guatemala still bears scars from the civil war that gripped the country for more than thirty years, ending finally in 1996. The government mainly relied on terror to suppress indigenous populations from supporting the leftist guerrillas. The Guatemalan Archbishop's Office for Human Rights estimates that the Guatemalan military and paramilitary forces committed over 90 percent of the atrocities. Indigenous people were almost always the target. Mass graves are still being unearthed.

"Radio has been important in Guatemala for decades," says Mark Camp, director of the Guatemala Radio Project for Cultural Survival, a nonprofit that advocates on behalf of indigenous groups. "During the civil war, radio played a really important part for the guerrillas to get their message out to the people."

So when the peace accords were drafted in 1996, a specific clause was included to allow the mostly illiterate, indigenous population to operate community radio stations. Station advocates argue that the constitution's guarantee of free expression and portions of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples further support the outlets' operation. "It says in Article 16: 'Indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages,'" Camp says, quoting from the declaration. "Guatemala was one of the countries to push this through."

But despite these legal underpinnings, the stations' right to broadcast has not been formally enshrined in domestic law. Congress has been hesitant to sanction the low-power outlets; during campaign season, politicians rely on commercial radio stations owned mostly by conglomerates that don't want a law that legitimizes their competition. The defiant, unlicensed stations prefer to call themselves





**Broadcast pioneers** Angélica Cubur Sul and Anselmo Xunic outside Radio Ixchel in Sumpango

“alegal,” a term coined by the community to highlight the ambiguity of their legal status.

Radio Ixchel, like most of the thousands of unlicensed stations operating in Guatemala, is staffed by volunteers and funded through the goodwill of its listeners. It broadcasts sixteen hours a day of alcoholism counseling, health advice, and children’s programming—plus lots of marimba.

According to Danielle Deluca, the program officer for the Guatemala Radio Project, if a community radio station wants to operate legally, it would have to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars to purchase a frequency license in a government auction. Such a sum is out of the question in a village like Sumpango, where laborers make \$4 a day and it’s a struggle just to scrape together Ixchel’s \$250-a-month budget.

So what’s a station director like Radio Ixchel’s Anselmo Xunic to do? With somewhere between 5,000 and 8,000 listeners tuning in every day, he’s de-

termined to keep broadcasting on a frequency that he doesn’t own.

In 2006, police confiscated Radio Ixchel’s homemade transmitter and equipment, and arrested Xunic and some of his staff. Within months, the town had chipped in enough to get them back on the air. Charges were dropped. “We don’t blame the police,” Xunic says, pointing out that the station has used its broadcast to help police track down criminals. “They use the station to help maintain peace, but when they get the call, they have to do their job and shut us down.”

The unlicensed stations will live under this threat until Guatemala’s congress acts. A bill to make the stations legal is on the voting schedule, but there is no timeline for an actual vote. In August, indigenous activists met with Roberto Alejos, the president of congress, to press for passage, but nothing concrete was resolved. “It’s a high priority of the congress to reform the telecommunications law to include community radio,” Alejos says. “But it does not have

sufficient support yet. The risk of losing it in the plenary session is still very real.”

Cultural Survival’s Mark Camp remains hopeful. “You have people from all these community stations getting on the bus, traveling to Guatemala City, waiting in line and telling their congressmen, ‘Hey, I’d like you to support this bill,’” he says. “That’s revolutionary. This is only fifteen years after you couldn’t talk politics for fear that you were going to wake up dead.”

In the meantime, Radio Ixchel and its sister stations will continue to operate in legal limbo, their homemade towers dotting the skylines of their tiny villages. “If they take our equipment, we will buy more, because this is something that the people need,” says Anselmo Xunic. “We don’t have fear, because we know we aren’t breaking the law.” **CJR**

CONNOR BOALS ([connorboals.com](http://connorboals.com)) is a freelance journalist based in Brooklyn. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *VeloNews*.

## Urgent Call

*Cell phones help a marginalized Indian community speak out*

ON THE EVENING OF MAY 16, 2010, VIJJOBAI TALAMI, THE HEADWOMAN OF Gumiapal village, phoned CGNet Swara, a fledgling mobile phone-based citizen journalism service. Talami provided a firsthand report about what happened that morning deep in the forests of the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh: "The police came and searched our village and burnt our houses and grain. They shot dead two villagers, saying they are Maoists. But they were defenseless people who were killed for no reason."

Since 2005, Indian security forces have been locked in a brutal civil war with Maoist insurgents in the villages and forests of Chhattisgarh. The conflict has claimed more than five thousand lives already—guerrillas and security personnel, but also scores of anonymous, unarmed villagers whom the state, often presenting little evidence, dubs insurgents. The victims overwhelmingly come from places like Gumiapal, inhabited by India's culturally distinct and socioeconomically marginalized indigenous communities, known as Adivasis.

Their forests sit atop some of the world's richest reserves of coal and iron ore. In the conflict zone's epicenter in the Dantewada district in south Chhattisgarh, trains ferry out iron ore for domestic and international markets, but villages have little access to quality public schools, health care, potable water, or public transport. Industrialization and extraction have brought state-backed dispossession of Adivasis, whose protests are crushed and lands taken under a colonial-era acquisition law.

Official neglect and contempt toward the Adivasis eased the Maoists' establishment of a "liberated zone" in the forests. The territorial struggle has intensified since 2009, when the central government launched Operation Green Hunt and sent in additional paramilitary troops. "Seven more of our villagers have been killed by forces in the past few months. One young girl is in prison. We live in constant fear, never knowing what might happen to us," Talami told me when we met in late July, as she challenged the official line that the victims were insurgents. But narratives like that are impossible to find in Chhattisgarh's expanding media, made up of more than a dozen newspapers and half a dozen television news channels.

There are multiple reasons for this vacuum: Adivasi villages can be isolated and located in the conflict zone, making them hard for journalists to reach; the Adivasis' millennia-old languages lack a written script and are spoken by few outsiders; and newsrooms rarely hire Adivasi journalists due to their marginalization and low levels of literacy. But more damaging are individual journalists' fear of retribution, and the mainstream media's news values, shaped by a deepening

alignment with Chhattisgarh's political and economic elite.

When Shubranshu Choudhary, a former BBC producer, returned to his home state of Chhattisgarh in the midst of the civil war, he was troubled by the absence of the Adivasi in the state's media. "I thought the Maoist rebellion was in many ways a failure of communication, since there were no spaces which truly reflected the Adivasi's problems and concerns," Choudhary says.

As a Knight International Journalism Fellow in 2009, Choudhary began scouting for inexpensive technologies that might support a grassroots platform where the Adivasis could share their own stories. In the forested villages, where there are few televisions and newspapers aren't distributed, Choudhary reasoned that the outlet would have to be voice-based, which would allow universal access and build on Adivasi traditions of oral expression. Villagers who contributed would not encounter editorial gatekeepers; there would only be a set of trained moderators charged with fact-checking postings to the extent possible.

India's cellular boom—and continuing restrictions on news content on private FM radio stations—drew Choudhary to a phone-based platform. In February 2010, he launched CGNet Swara, a word that means "voice" in many Indian languages. Today, villagers use cell phones (available in rural India for 1,000 rupees—about \$20) to call Swara and post their news, and listen to others' contributions. The content is also posted on Swara's website. "The idea was to make the medium as simple as possible, so that the villagers could use it, own and define it for themselves," says Bill Theis, a Microsoft researcher based in Bangalore who helped develop the service's technology.

CGNet Swara gets between ten and fifteen audio contributions each day, typically releasing about five. The most poignant, like the posting narrated by Talami, give news of extra-judicial killings of hitherto anonymous Adivasis. But the majority narrate either everyday abuses by unaccountable public institutions, or ongoing or potential dispossession. For example, on July 16, Bindeshwari Painkra called to report that village

workers had been waiting three years to be paid by a state-run rural employment program. And on July 28, Savita Rath reported on a rally in the coal-rich belt of northern Chhattisgarh, where residents were protesting a mining company's move to acquire their land and the incarceration of a village activist.

Rath says it is inconceivable that information like hers would appear in the mainstream press. A regular CG-Net Swara contributor, she is grateful for the new outlet, even if it offers only a small counterpoint to the journalism regularly practiced in the region.

Despite a proliferation of outlets, Chhattisgarh's reporters work under compromised conditions. Arvind Awasthi, president of the 2,500-member Chhattisgarh Working Journalists Union, estimates that more than 70 percent of the state's journalists do not get a regular salary. Instead, their pay is dependent on selling advertisements and boosting circulation. "I was hired on the condition that I get advertisements of twenty thousand rupees each month. Of this, three thousand rupees would be my salary," said a former journalist who requested anonymity. "If I fell short, my salary would fall accordingly."

"In such conditions, the independent journalist is a myth," Awasthi said. Poor pay ensures that few have the resources to travel to verify official claims. Being forced to sell ads renders journalists wary of aggressive reporting. L. Mudliar, a journalist who has worked in the region for three decades, was once approached by twenty-seven villagers after one of India's largest mining firms, the National Mineral Development Corporation, acquired their land in exchange for paltry compensation. "The villagers had supporting documents, and my reporting proved their claims were true," said Mudliar. "But the editor refused to carry the story, saying NMDC would withhold its full-page advertisements."

The press's link to big business can be more direct. Two leading Hindi newspapers in the state, the *Dainik Bhaskar* and *Haribhoomi*, are part of companies with stakes in local power plants and coal mining. When the Dainik Bhaskar group held a mandatory public hearing in a town it proposed displacing along with six villages for a coal mine, national newspa-

## 'In such conditions, the independent journalist is a myth.'

pers reported total public opposition and many angry questions. But the following day's edition of the *Dainik Bhaskar* falsely claimed unanimous support.

The economic entanglements pale when compared to the mainstream press's allegiances in the civil war. Salman Ravi, a BBC journalist who has covered the rebel movement for twenty years and who moved to Chhattisgarh last year to report on it full time, said most media unabashedly back the state: "I was shocked to see reporters heckle peace activists at press conferences. The language of conflict reportage is extremely partisan, filled with pronouns like 'we,' where the publication openly identifies itself with the state or the security forces."

On July 29, reports in multiple newspapers, based solely on press handouts and written in near-identical language, typified how journalists rarely question official claims that someone is a Maoist insurgent. One read:

In a commendable joint action of District Police Force, three rebels were successfully nabbed on Thursday.... On thorough interrogation, the rebels (aged between sixteen and twenty-two) confessed to their crimes.

The stories made no attempt to ascertain the perspective of the families of the three young Adivasis, or that of the village from which they hailed.

It is equally difficult to report on Maoist excesses, like killings of suspected police informers. The rebels have a tightly controlled party line, and the leadership engages with the media on its own terms, restricting travel in villages under their control. On June 1, the party wrote an open letter arguing that the concept of neutrality does not hold in a class war. "The rebels believe that a journalist is either a voice of the oppressive state, or of the poor, whom the Maoists represent," Ravi said. "I believe that it is my job to report on all sides. But that is unacceptable to them."

In this climate, some journalists have paid a heavy price. In the middle of 2005, troops and a vigilante group began deploying scorched-earth tactics, burning more than six hundred Adivasi villages in hopes of rooting out the guerrillas. The campaign went largely unreported in Chhattisgarh's media. That September, Kamlesh Painkra, an Adivasi journalist, wrote a story for his Hindi newspaper, *Hindsatt*, on how vigilantes had torched a village called Mankeli, forcing its residents to flee. The story attracted the attention of national civil rights groups that soon dispatched fact-finding missions.

Irate local officials repeatedly pressured Painkra to retract the piece. "The vigilantes would call me at night and detain me outside a makeshift center, where I could hear inmates being beaten and tortured," Painkra said. When Painkra resisted, he said his newspaper's owner was forced to fire him. He abandoned journalism, and works as a health educator for Doctors Without Borders. "It is very difficult to swear by concepts like justice and truth in one's journalism," said Painkra. "I could not do it."

Mangal Kunjam is attempting to do so. The twenty-year-old idealistic newspaper reporter is an occasional contributor to Swara, and a rare Adivasi journalist in the state's mainstream media. His knowledge of the local geography, and of the Adivasi language and culture, has helped him cultivate a network of sources in the villages, though not without risk. "The police have told me that if I am ever reporting in a village where they happen to come on a search operation, it might be the end of me," Kunjam told me. He said he carries on despite the intimidation because he feels educated Adivasis like him were duty-bound to report on his community's problems.

Choudhary, CGNet Swara's founder, acknowledged that given the current environment, the outlet offers only a small step toward democratizing the media for the Adivasis. "The big challenge remains: How do we reduce the power of money and increase the power of people in Chhattisgarh's journalism?" **CJR**

CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY is a Fulbright-Nehru scholar at Columbia University, and a former reporter at the *Hindustan Times*. Her reporting on the civil war in Chhattisgarh won a 2010 Lorenzo Natali Journalism Prize.

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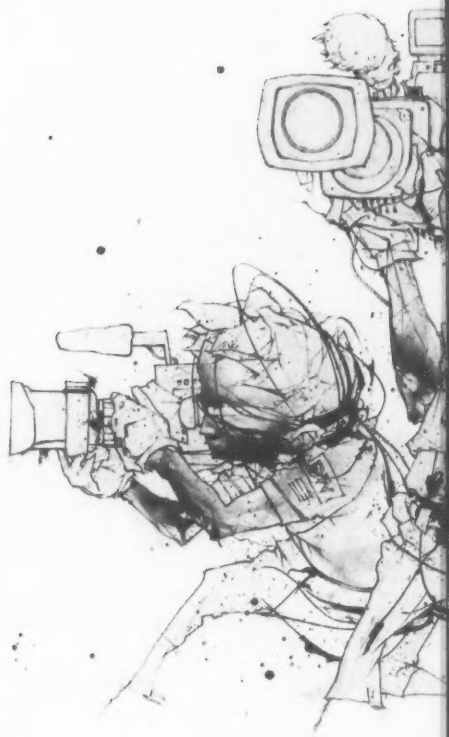




# Fade to Black

*As a video revolution sweeps the world,  
US television news caps its lens*

BY DAVE MARASH



For the first time in history, mankind is developing a universal language: video. People now communicate with video on two billion computers and more than one and a half billion television sets, and by 2013 you can add another one billion video-capable people regularly accessing the web from their cell phones. The most popular spoken and written language is English, with 1.8 billion users. Looks like video already wins.

No wonder. Video is the distillation of the four ways people exchange information—speech, print, sound, and pictures. Video can convey more information more powerfully to more people in more places—and more quickly—than TV, radio, print, or the voice of the evangelist. And since, historically speaking, this age of video is relatively new, people are still getting better at acquiring and distributing their information via video.

Good news for the future of television news, right? “Luckily,” says Alex Wallace, an NBC News senior vice president, “we’re TV; we’re also based on pictures.”

Yes. Logically, the video revolution and television news should thrive together. But just as the rest of the world is alive with video information about a bullet-train crash in China or revolutions in Bahrain or Syria, America’s television screens, especially on cable news, are tuning out the world. When YouTube, Facebook, or Twitter show so much

video of real life, why do ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, CNN, and Fox show us so little?

Data from long-term monitoring of American television news by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, as well as observations from our own much shorter-term sampling of American TV news outlets and a handful of foreign news channels, reveal several things:

- CNN has made a sharp turn away from video reporting. Fox News Channel now shows more video than CNN, while MSNBC, after some excellent reporting of the Arab Spring, rarely uses any video. Most of what it does broadcast is sound bites from the campaign trail, talking-heads-*coal* to talking-heads-Newcastle.

- At the networks, the loss is not in airtime but in authenticity, as “new ways to cover the news” increasingly substitute for journalists actually reporting from the scene.

- Worse, and displacing far more airtime from report-



Illustration by Andrew Zbihlyj

ing, is the amount of talk. Interviews, panels, conversations among anchors, pundits, scholars, and “experts” which, at best, produce intelligent but evergreen generalizations by people who haven’t “been there” for a while, are preempting the current and specific observations available only from those who *are* there.

While more and more of the world is “speaking” video, American TV news is ignoring it, in favor of cheaper but less informative ways to report the news.

THE PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM MONITORS American television news, breaking down content into three categories: domestic stories, foreign stories involving the US, and foreign stories with no direct US tie. They also separate programs into components, like video packages, interviews, stories the anchor reads, and live appearances by correspon-

dents. To Mark Jurkowitz, the former television beat reporter for *The Boston Globe* who now watches TV news for PEJ, the video packages are where you find “sophisticated, on-scene, edited reporting.”

We asked PEJ to break out its data for two periods, four years apart—the first three months of 2007, and the first three months of 2011. What they showed is that airtime devoted to video packages “was down significantly,” says Jurkowitz; on the three network news shows and the three cable news channels the time devoted to packages dropped from 43 percent of the typical broadcast in 2007 to 37 percent in 2011.

Almost all of that drop is attributable to CNN, where in 2007, 46 percent of programming was video packages. By 2011, that had dropped to 18 percent. Across the categories—domestic stories, US-international stories, and non-US international stories—in 2011 CNN was giving less than half the airtime to video packages as it did in 2007.

Elsewhere the cuts have been more subtle, particularly the cuts in foreign reporting. You may not have noticed, because the networks are getting better at hiding their retreat behind compilations of video gathered by other news organizations but packaged by familiar network correspondents. Even counting those compilations, PEJ measured cutbacks on video packages of 8 (NBC), 10 (ABC), and 13 (CBS) percentage points between 2007 and 2011 in the category of international stories with US involvement.

One example from that category: "There's been a stunning lack of coverage of the Afghanistan war," says Jurkowitz. "Despite the fact that the strategic stakes are high, despite the fact of the scores of thousands of troops we have on the ground, despite the fact of the growing casualty count."

On Tuesday, June 14 and Friday, June 17, we recorded the evening news broadcasts of ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC, CNN, and Fox News Channel. To this reporter, with fifty-two years at ABC, CBS, NBC, and Al Jazeera English, among others, the single biggest shock came from former host Cenk Uygur's 6 p.m. hour on MSNBC (he has since been provisionally replaced by Al Sharpton). One of his hours used all of one minute and ten seconds of video; the other, one minute and forty seconds, and this was video of more talking heads.

"You call this a news channel?" I asked NBC's Alex Wallace. She replied: "MSNBC is a place for intelligent conversation ... more than the latest video. If it's the latest video about a political candidate, MSNBC would want it, but it's more of a niche market, MSNBC, than a news market." 'Nuff said.

PEJ measures Fox's share of news programming devoted to video packages at consistently close to 30 percent, and Fox is often aggressive and original in finding video stories not on everyone's radar—a manhunt in Montana on June 14, for example. But this was someone else's video, smartly acquired by Fox. Not that a Fox reporter on the scene always makes a difference: correspondent Rick Leventhal filed a one-minute, twenty-second report on his overnight crossing of the Gulf of Sidra to Libya's besieged Misrata, on a ferry filled with weapons and fighters. Someone had a video camera, but the report offered only twenty pedestrian seconds of footage.

Still, the big change is at CNN, and it's not just a few seconds of video here or there, but its whole approach to covering the news. In 2007 almost half its airtime went to packaged reports from journalists in the field. By 2011, that was down to less than a fifth. Jonathan Klein was the president of CNN over that period, until he was replaced in September 2010. If he's the guy who killed the composed video report, he isn't apologizing. "I think the art of the package had fallen on very hard times," Klein says. "Of course, there is still nothing better than a well-crafted *60 Minutes* package, but those are not the instantly forgettable roundups that you are talking about."

As Klein explains his decision to move away from packaged reports he critiques his own employees, comparing the creation of cable news to the expansion of Major League Baseball: "There was such an explosion of outlets that you had people rushed to the majors, to the networks, without a very good grounding in reporting or telling a story, so what

they were doing was just mindlessly aping a format they had learned when they first got into the business."

Rather than fix this sorry level of performance, Klein says, he chose other, cheaper ways to cover the news.

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## Where did all the minutes go that CNN used to devote to video packages? To chat.

Gosh, did I say cheaper? Yes. To send a reporting team to Alabama for a few days might cost a few thousand dollars, Klein estimates, but to send that same team to Afghanistan, "you're looking at extensive security, and it runs you into very serious money ... between \$50,000 and \$100,000 just to get going." Instead, Klein explains, "It's far less expensive to have a reporter do a live top from the Pentagon, where we have a fixed camera, than to send a reporter to the battlefield. The best news organizations find ways to do both. You make periodic trips to make sure your reporting is authentic and informed, but you cannot afford to do that every single day."

Indeed, "We go to fewer places, a lot less often," says an A-list network correspondent with years of domestic and international reporting experience, and "finance is one of the reasons." Does this make a difference? "It's the difference from seeing something up close and seeing it only from afar," he says. "It goes to the very essence of reporting."

More and more, the correspondent says, he and his colleagues report on international stories from Washington, using the money-saving formula described by Klein. "The audience gets a different perspective if the story is seen from the outside looking in, rather versus the inside looking out," says our correspondent.

But turning the focus of news away from video is not just about pinching pennies. Klein explains: "The challenge that I and a lot of news executives laid down for our people ... was to break out of the standard formula and think about what the best way to tell a story would be. Sometimes, the tape package is the best possible way to tell a story. But sometimes there are other, better ways."

Better in what sense? Not in representing reality, but in giving viewers the familiar personalities they love. "TV news programs are increasingly driven by star anchors," Klein points out, "The audience is drawn to the anchors' performance and their insights and their presentation of the day's news." But, he says, "as soon as you go to these generic packages, ordinary correspondents, many of them not known to the audience, the show becomes generic."

But is that true? It is, in fact, a huge group of "ordinary correspondents, many of them not known to the audience," that has helped make Al Jazeera English into the world's



fastest-growing news channel. And that popularity has come during a period of growing global competition.

I've counted sixty-six television news channels broadcasting in English today, and after more than two years of watching many of them, I can tell you that most look like they learned to shoot and edit watching the old BBC and CNN. They're all using more or less the same gear as today's CNN and BBC, and more and more often demonstrating professional levels of mastery. By my reckoning, 90 percent of these channels didn't exist ten years ago, and some of them operate under severe political constraints. For both those reasons, most do not yet approach the quality of journalism or videography found at ABC, BBC, CBC, or AJE. But their ambition is to compete, and every year they get better at it.

WHERE DID ALL OF CNN'S MINUTES GO, YOU ASK? THE ONES that used to be spent on video packages? PEJ's numbers give a simple answer: to chat. At CNN, between 2007 and 2011 the share of airtime for packages dropped by 28 percentage points, while the share for interviews went up by 26 percentage points. This exchange did more than rob correspondents of storytelling time; it changed their work.

In addition to interviews, another net gainer of airtime at every one of the American channels was live interactions—"two-ways," they're called—between anchors and correspondents. They can work sometimes, but once correspondents become recognizable people, there is curiosity not just about their opinions but about their emotions, a subject often probed during these conversations. "I remember telling my reporters, one thing I never want to hear in your reports is, 'I think,'" says Frank Sesno, a former CNN White House correspondent and Washington bureau chief. He laughs at the memory of a different, more buttoned-up time, but he worries, too: "We have celebrated the news to the point where we are losing the news, where it is more about what some people think than what they know.

"If we were producing a video piece," Sesno continues, "there was an editorial process. There was a producer assigned to it. There were interviews. There was a copy edit procedure. When people were doing live shots ... there was no way to scrutinize every word. So you stood up in front of the camera and spoke spontaneously."

Okay, Jonathan Klein might retort, live shots may not give viewers much depth or precision but they have other qualities. "A well-done live report has the advantage of energy and immediacy over a package," Klein says. "Sanjay Gupta reporting live from the medical center in Haiti, as the Belgian doctors were abandoning, was by far the most powerful story to emerge from the Haiti earthquake last year, and that was a live shot. No tape package could have captured the drama of this situation as it unfolded."

For correspondents, this "drama" comes at a price. Live shots steal time from reporting, the work which provides reporters the facts from which their authority is built.

Some TV news executives don't agree. "I can see your worry," says Michael Clemente, a former aide-de-camp to Peter Jennings at ABC who is now a senior vice president at

Fox News Channel. "If they're going to be doing it almost hourly, the reporting might suffer at the hand of live shots. That may be true for correspondents who grew up only filing at six o'clock for the evening news, but most of the reporters out there now at a place like Fox know how to file for radio, write a story for dot-com, do their live shot, and report."

Alex Wallace, Clemente's counterpart at NBC and MSNBC, says, "That's something we struggle with. For example, when we were in Libya, when MSNBC would want three live shots and NBC wants the reporter to go out to find a small town that the rebels say they've taken back. That's the demand of having five platforms."

Both Wallace and Clemente offer the same strategy to keep such demands under control. They are always, they say, ready to break their correspondents away from the live shots, "for three or four hours," they both estimated, of reporting.

Such talk sounds good in the newsroom, but in the world, where the live location may be miles away from "the story," where finding and talking with witnesses is not like making instant oatmeal, the time between live shots is often not enough. And as Jonathan Klein confessed, sometimes even the best intentions get steamrolled by newsroom habit. "That's a big problem we tried to change at CNN. We tried to push hard to reduce the number of live shots. At the White House, we tried to free up our reporter from the north lawn just to see if they could up the real reporting. It failed because muscle memory snaps back. Producers automatically schedule live shots, and we had to challenge our producers: 'Why is Suzanne Malveaux on the lawn again? Isn't she supposed to be doing some reporting?'"

ALMOST ALL NEWS EXECUTIVES SAY THEY WANT THE SAME thing—news that is new and true and distinctive. Mike Clemente of Fox: "I'm forever telling our reporters ... what we want is whatever is new and factual. And if we do that, we'll get more people watching our channel." Alex Wallace of NBC/MSNBC: "What we want is stories told with unique video that separates us from the mass of video out there."

So we looked for 'em—stories that were unique and distinctive and new. But comparing what the three American networks and the three cable news channels did on those two days in June with some foreign news channels—Iran's Press TV, Russia's RT, Britain's BBC, and Qatar's Al Jazeera English—we came away wanting more from America.

There were excellent video reports on each channel (except MSNBC), but few felt unique or even new. There were classics of afflicting the comfortable (ABC's Jake Tapper on Congress's exclusive gymnasias); and comforting the afflicted (a terrific CBS piece by David Martin on the military's lack of programs for wives of returning Afghanistan and Iraq warriors); and two examples of NBC correspondents pushing the envelope—Stephanie Gosk penetrating an anti-American mob in Tripoli and John Ray sneaking across the border into Syria to video the devastated town of Jisr al-Shughour.

But Maria Finoshina's report on RT, for example, on how selling and buying gas in Tripoli has become a female preoccupation because men in a city under siege had more impor-

tant things to do, was news to me, and told me something more significant about Tripoli than the presence of angry supporters of Muammar Qaddafi. I also learned new things from RT's Sean Thomas, who took me to the southernmost Russian Orthodox Church on Earth, in Antarctica, and from Press TV's Ashraf Shannon's story of conflict over natural gas in Gaza. During the civil war in the Ivory Coast, France 24 and Al Jazeera English regularly had reporters on the scene. My impression watching the story, confirmed with US officials there, was that no American TV journalists showed up.

Of course, these international channels have an advantage in the "new" department from our point of view, since they frequently address things that Americans know little about. But they often seem to seek out stories a little more imaginatively than their American counterparts. And many of them are mastering video, the world's emerging lingua franca. Watch news channels like Express 24/7 in Pakistan, Channel NewsAsia in Singapore, or CCTV News or CNC in China and you see channels trying to catch up with the old masters, using the conventions of the trade and the equipment of the moment to create video news made better by what seem to be hordes of reporters and cameras in the field.

Many of the channels resemble their nations. France 24 is very French. It prefers theories to facts and lectures to video packages, but in some otherwise neglected areas of the world, like francophone Africa, they rule the roost. Notwithstanding the reporting triumphs mentioned above, RT, the former Russia Today, is a perfect paradox: its message is unrelentingly anti-American but its presentation is a pathetic parody of American TV—Valley Girl anchors, Barbarella reporters, and a steady diet of reports on American aggression abroad and oppression at home. Press TV of Iran isn't too fond of the US either, and its lowest-budget, lowest-skill presentation is usually a waste of perfectly good bandwidth. But if you want a peek at Iranian life, where you gonna go?

As a student last year, Bilal Lakhani helped monitor these international channels for the Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism's "Global Media Wars" project. He told me that after the death of Osama bin Laden he went on Facebook and was surprised to find "lots of people sharing RT and Press TV videos. That's when I realized that on major turning-point events like Osama's death, these channels are going to find an audience whose viewpoints align with theirs."

Columbia's Ann Cooper started "Global Media Wars" after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testified in March before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that, "We are engaged in an information war, and we're losing that war."

Who's winning? "Al Jazeera has been the leader in ... literally changing people's minds and attitudes," Clinton said. "You may not agree with it, but you feel like you're getting real news around the clock instead of a million commercials, and, you know, arguments between talking heads, and the kind of stuff that we do on our news." (Full disclosure: I was an anchor for AJE from its debut in November 2006 until March 2008.)

Al Jazeera English's hallmark has been video reporting. "We have better visual content than anyone else," brags Snorre Wik, a director of photography at AJE. He says he's regularly allowed to give the viewer a "sense of adventure,

the feeling that they are experiencing something tangible and not in theory ... which is why real video is more valuable and more powerful than anything that anyone can tell you."

AJE, he says, offers a marked contrast to his years at NBC, not just in creative opportunities but, more importantly, in terms of being there, where news is breaking. Lawrence Pintak, a former CBS News Middle East correspondent turned academic, says that AJE stands head and shoulders above all the other English-language news channels, because of its dominance in eyes-on coverage. AJE, he says, "just plain has so many more boots on the ground. It has more boots on the ground than the BBC and armies more boots on the ground than CNN International." (See Pintak's May/June cover story in *CJR*, "Breathing Room: toward a new Arab media.")

The unfortunate bottom line, as Pintak sees it: "That's why, after 9/11, Americans didn't understand the impact American policy was having, because we didn't see it from the perspective of the people on the ground, because there weren't people on the ground covering the story."

But things are changing at Al Jazeera, too. They still have people on the ground almost everywhere, it seems, but the endlessly breaking news of the Arab Spring has pushed aside prepared packages in favor of live updates, and even as the crisis settles into a turbulent routine, the change in formatting continues. As one video journalist at Al Jazeera English told me, "the new boss just loves his live shots. He thinks people relate to them better than to packages." Uh oh.

As amateur video from the Internet grows like kudzu across the digital universe, TV news producers have to figure out how they can winnow and add value to it, to hold their audiences. One way might be to provide better professional video packages—better shot, more knowledgeably written and assembled—to provide context and balance and a storyteller's touch to what can be just distorting fragments on YouTube or Twitvid.

Or, conversely, American TV news can cede the video field to the amateurs and add value to what they harvest from the Internet with talk, two-ways, or panel discussions about the news and all those images.

Of course, the challenge of dipping into that hurricane of Internet video is determining who made each one, how accurately it represents reality, what context it requires, and whose interests it might serve. Unfortunately, the very people needed to sort those questions out are only rarely on the job anymore. The American television journalists will be visiting the field occasionally, but the bulk of their reporting will be done from home. The bulk of the video they will use will be compiled from other people's work, and will reflect no original reporting of their own.

And veracity and authority, where will that come from? Old recollections and unsourced pictures? If a tree falls in the forest and all you've got is file footage and some guy who once was a lumberjack, the sound produced is likely to be bad news. **CJR**

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DAVE MARASH won eleven Emmy Awards, an Overseas Press Club Award, and a duPont Award during a career covering news and sports on radio and TV. Sarah Fitzpatrick, a broadcast associate at CBS News, contributed video research for this story.

# The Scandal Beat

*Does the press's obsession with rule-breaking get in the way of real reform of college sports?*

BY DANIEL LIBIT

In December, Ohio State University suspended five of its football players for violating the rules governing intercollegiate athletics by exchanging their Buckeye memorabilia for various forms of payment, including the handiwork of a local Columbus tattoo parlor. Over the next few months, the digging of media outlets near and far pried open a capacious vault of misdeeds: the "gear scheme," as it came to be called, involved not just a

few players during a single season, but dozens of players over the better part of a decade; in that time, a number of scholarship athletes had also received sweetheart deals at a local auto outlet; and head coach Jim Tressel had hidden incriminating evidence of these transgressions from his superiors for more than eight months.

Punishment ensued. Ohio State, a perennial power in college football for more than half a century, forfeited its entire 2010 Sugar Bowl championship season; Tressel, regarded by many as a paragon of coaching integrity, was forced to resign; and Terrelle Pryor, the team's star quarterback who was at the center of the scandal, abruptly left school to try his luck in the National Football League.

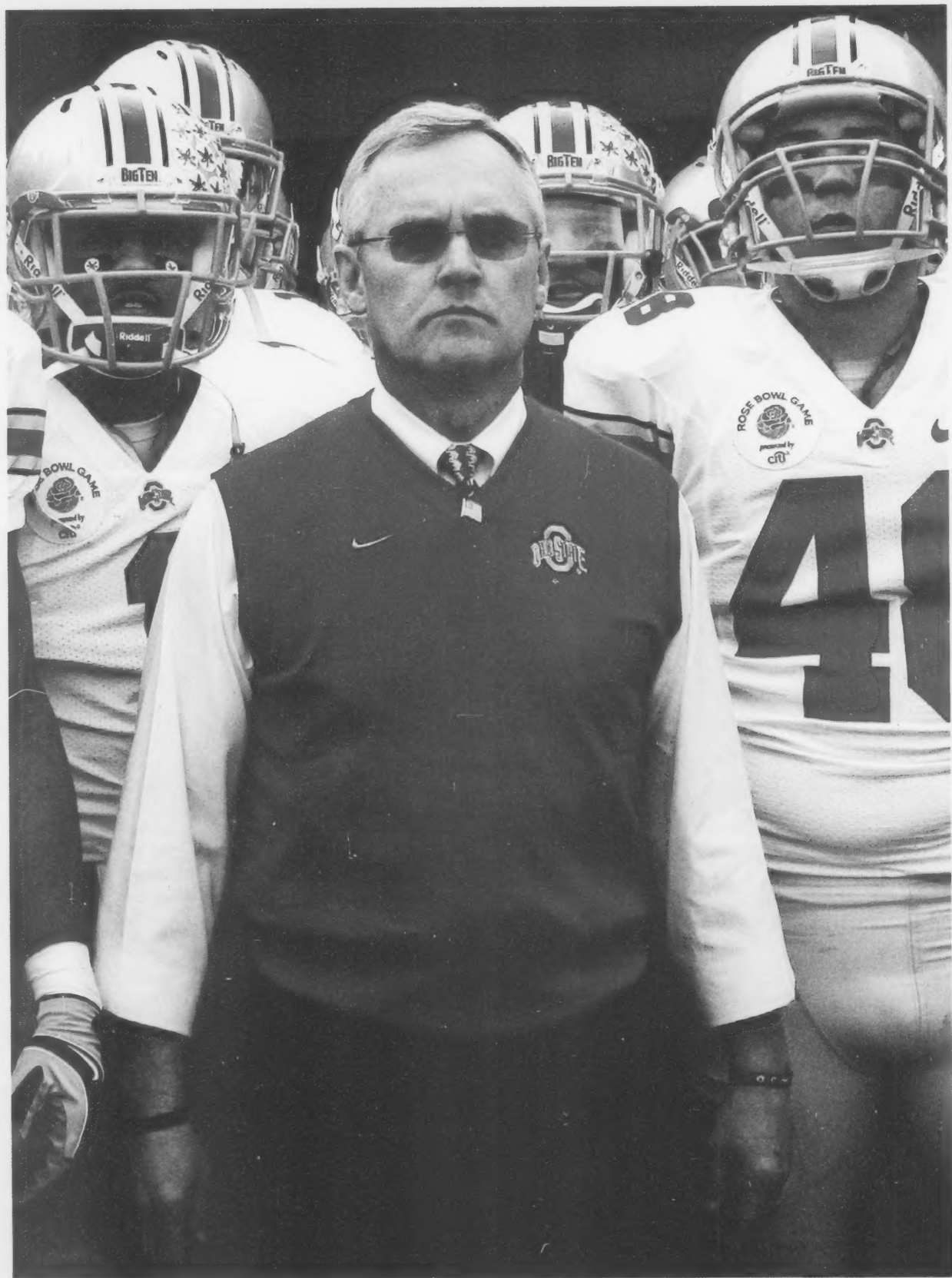
In many ways, the chaos in Columbus is just the latest in a seemingly endless series of scandals in big-time college sports. Over the last three decades, investigative sports reporters have excavated dozens of episodes of rule-break-

ing in football and men's basketball programs, from Southern Methodist University's "Ponygate" affair in the 1980s to the pay-for-play shenanigans at the University of Washington in the 1990s to agent tampering at the University of Southern California in the aughts. As this issue went to press, Yahoo Sports blew the lid off the latest installment, at the University of Miami, which, based on initial reports, may eclipse all other scandals in terms of scale and audacity. Off-field trouble, once a side project of the beat, has become the defining story of college athletics. Anyone who doubts it need only scan the header of ESPN.com's homepage, which on many days reads like the abstract of a criminal indictment.

The cumulative reportage of a relatively small group of sports journalists on what might be called the Scandal Beat constitutes a compelling case for the unenforceability of the NCAA's bylaws. In the process of building that case, these reporters have delivered an impressive perp walk of bogeymen: scurrilous agents, meddling boosters, selfish teenage athletes, badly behaved coaches. In many ways it has been a wildly successful display of watchdog journalism, and it helped establish the idea that sports is something that can and should be subjected to the same journalistic scrutiny as other institutions in our society—and that the sports desk could be more than just the "Toy Department," as it had been derisively tagged by newsroom colleagues.

But the success of this work also belies a deeper problem with the coverage of college sports. The Scandal Beat exists as a kind of closed loop: a report of rules violations, an investigation, sanctions, dismissals, vows to do better, and then on to the next case of corruption where the cycle is repeated. The reporting, intentionally or not, promotes the idea that the corruption that plagues the NCAA is the problem, rather than merely a symptom of a system that is fundamentally broken. The Scandal Beat, with its drama and spectacular falls from grace, is much less adept at managing the next step: a robust discussion, prominently and persistently conducted, of why these scandals keep happening and what can be done to prevent them.

Despite its familiar feel, the OSU implosion seemed to represent a significant milepost in the national conversation about big-time college sports—if not a moment of truth, then at least a moment for truth. The fact that the conflagration had claimed a member of college football royalty, combined



**Before the fall** Former Ohio State coach Jim Tressel leads his team onto the field in the Rose Bowl, January 1, 2010.



with the contemporaneous cascade of other scandals—including those that currently smolder at Auburn, Oregon, Boise State, Tennessee, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Oklahoma—appears to have opened the door to the possibility of finally starting that deeper discussion. In August, a summit of university leaders, convened by NCAA President Mark Emmert, agreed to raise educational standards for incoming freshmen and streamline the association's bloated rule book. Summit participants vowed to address in the coming months the issue of athletes' financial needs, but Emmert reiterated his opposition to paying students. Meanwhile, a class-action lawsuit filed against the NCAA by former UCLA basketball star Ed O'Bannon, which challenges the non-compensation of college athletes, is slated to go to trial in early 2013. The sports commentariat has begun to question, more frequently and volubly, the very foundation of amateurism and higher education that the stakeholders in big-time college sports cling to. And even some of the stakeholders themselves are easing their grip: Mike Slive, the commissioner of the Southeastern Conference, which is widely considered to be the dominant football conference in the country, has advocated providing additional financial support for athletes, and in July confessed that the scandal headlines had cost major college sports the "benefit of the doubt."

This moment may come to nothing. Given the NCAA's history of fecklessness and the powerful financial interests aligned with the status quo, meaningful reform will be difficult. But it raises an interesting question for the future of sports coverage: Is the *Scandal Beat*, with its singular focus on busting rule-breakers, paving the way to reform or helping to block the way?

### Sharecropper Economy

Even at its most righteous, college athletics—and I'm referring here to the so-called revenue sports, football and men's basketball—is a multibillion-dollar enterprise based on an exploitive business model. Universities get gobs of money that helps float their entire athletic departments, and coaches and administrators are paid handsome salaries, all from the talent and effort of an essentially unpaid labor force of young athletes.

The NCAA's 346 biggest athletic departments, which are classified as Division I, took in combined revenue of \$8.7 billion last year. Ohio State's budget alone topped \$100 million; and Jim Tressel, prior to his resignation, was earning an annual salary of roughly \$3.5 million. (It's worth noting that Tressel was only the sixth-highest-paid college football coach in 2010; Alabama's Nick Saban topped the list at \$6 million.)

Meanwhile, the "compensation" for OSU's football players, like all collegiate athletes, tops out at tuition, room, and board—but only for those on scholarship. This fact—that the kids get at least a shot at a free college degree—is what defenders of the system lean on when the matter of exploitation comes up. But even allowing for improved average graduation rates (which the NCAA trumpeted last year despite decidedly mixed results, especially at the more prominent sports schools), the idea that meaningful education is behind

all of those diplomas is at least debatable, when one considers the number of "general studies" degrees and the evidence—turned up by the *Scandal Beat*—that classwork is not always handled by the athletes alone.

In any event, these "student-athletes" are prevented from earning any additional money that might be construed as related to their role as an athlete. Schools can sell the players' jerseys and other memorabilia at stadium gift shops, they can put the players on billboards, feature them in television ads, and trot them out to impress the boosters, all without a dime going into the athletes' pockets. In March, HBO's "Real Sports" did the math and found that under the revenue-sharing model used by the NFL and National Basketball Association, where players get 57 percent of league revenues, members of the University of Texas's 2009 football team were each worth \$630,000 while those of last year's national champion Duke University men's basketball team were worth \$1.2 million each. A *USA Today* story that same month calculated the median annual cost of an athlete's grant-in-aid package: \$27,923, a relative pittance.

It is a disjuncture of the market value that begs to be disobeyed, a fact that isn't lost on the *Scandal Beat* reporters. "I once heard athletes described as sharecroppers, and I always thought that was pretty accurate," says Charles Robinson, the senior investigative reporter for Yahoo Sports who has had a hand in breaking some of the biggest corruption scandals in recent years, including the latest out of Miami.

Robinson and his colleagues have captured the surface consequences of this perverse economy (the rampant cheating), but their work also has atomized a story fundamentally about economics into an endless cat-and-mouse game of rules violations.

### Rise of the Scandal Beat

Reporters first began to seriously grapple with the chicanery in college sports in the 1940s, when a point-shaving scandal that began with City College of New York spread to six other universities. "Big-time college basketball, the commercialized, Madison Square Garden variety, got another brutal kick in the teeth," read a *Time* magazine story from 1951, "the worst yet, in a game already punchy from its own scandals."

In the 1960s, Jack Scott, a former Stanford sprinter who became athletic director at Oberlin College, set out to save college sports by crusading against its over-commercialization and over-authoritarian coaching culture. "Scott really gave voice to a lot of the ills underlying a lot of this stuff and he did it in a very smart and organized way," says Sandy Padwe, who served two stints as *Sports Illustrated's* senior editor in charge of investigations from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. "Slowly, but surely, people began to realize that the only way to get at the root of this problem was to do it investigatively."

But it was in the 1980s that college sports ballooned into the sprawling, hype-besotted business we know today—and, not coincidentally, when the *Scandal Beat* really took root. A 1984 Supreme Court decision ruled that the NCAA's television plan—which limited the number of televised football games

and the opportunities for schools to negotiate their own terms—violated the Sherman Antitrust Act, paving the way for the explosion of modern college football broadcasting. In 1982, CBS began exclusively broadcasting the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, at a price of \$16 million a season (it grew to \$55 million by 1988). Last year, the NCAA grossed \$680 million from fees on television and marketing rights.

As the money in the newly corporatized college sports world soared, and the NCAA's rule book grew fatter and more nitpicky, so too did the incentives to break the rules. A post-Watergate zeal in the nation's newsrooms and the failure of the NCAA's enforcement arm to keep pace further crystallized the mission of the Scandal Beat. "College sports was fertile ground," says Armen Keteyian, a former investigative reporter for *Sports Illustrated* who is now the chief investigative correspondent for CBS News. "It was like a hundred-to-one in terms of scandals to the number of NCAA investigators. They were naïve, and they didn't have the depth of knowledge to do these kinds of investigations."

Journalism did, however, and a handful of investigative pioneers on the sports desk built the template for the Scandal Beat, establishing the methods (hanging around parking lots to find out what cars athletes drove, for instance), the patois ("in violation of NCAA rules"), and the general disposition of the scrutiny. The work, done with great ingenuity and often at great risk—reporters faced death threats while their employers endured lawsuits and subscription cancellations—won its journalistic stripes. Within the decade, two mid-sized newspapers would win Pulitzers for their investigations of athletic departments: *The Arizona Daily Star* in 1981 and the *Lexington (Kentucky) Herald Leader* in 1986.

Still, one of the salient points of Jack Scott's "radical athleticism" movement begun a generation earlier, that the rule-breaking that plagued college sports is intrinsically tied to the commercialization of the enterprise, tended over time to get lost in the cataclysm of corruption that toppled heroes and humbled great universities. "We operated under, 'Here are the rules and if people are breaking those rules we're going to report on that,'" says Elliott Almond, an investigative sports reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* back then who now covers Stanford for the *San Jose Mercury News*. "We were never entirely reflective."

### The Coach Killer

George Dohrmann's career provides an instructive illustration of the Scandal Beat's allure as well as its limitations. Dohrmann, a senior writer for *Sports Illustrated*, started in 1996 as a part-timer answering phones on the *Los Angeles Times*'s sports investigative desk. Among his first story assignments was to co-author a series that explored the matrix of conflicted interests that suffuse elite amateur basketball in talent-rich Southern California.

While doing those stories, Dohrmann got a tip that Baron Davis, a highly-rated point guard who had recently committed to play at UCLA, was driving around in a suspicious car. Dohrmann went to Davis's high school to poke around, where he spotted Davis pulling out of a parking lot in a black

**'We accept the Big Lie,' says Rick Telander, 'so we are dazzled and amazed by the little lies.'**

1991 Chevy Blazer. As Dohrmann soon reported, the Blazer originally belonged UCLA coach Jim Harrick, who sold it to Davis's sister two days after Davis signed his letter of intent with the school. Despite what seemed a clear violation of NCAA rules, the Pac-10 Conference (now the Pac-12), of which UCLA is a member, failed to find any wrongdoing on the part of the coach or the school, ultimately accepting their contorted explanation of how the transaction was aboveboard.

"That shaped everything that I have come to understand about how the NCAA works," says Dohrmann. "We found something that anybody with healthy common sense would say was a quid pro quo and the school managed to explain it away."

Nevertheless, a month later, Harrick was fired. The official explanation was that he had falsified expense reports to obscure the fact he had taken recruits out for dinner, but it is hard to believe that Dohrmann's revelations had nothing to do with the decision.

Not long after, Dohrmann left the *Times* to cover the University of Minnesota for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. "You walk in and you assume that the school is cheating," he says, describing his mindset at the time. In 1999, Dohrmann, then just twenty-six, found the dirt in the Golden Gophers' athletic department, reporting a series of stories that detailed an academic fraud operation in the men's basketball program. The revelations won Dohrmann a Pulitzer, and a job at *Sports Illustrated*, while the school was hit with serious sanctions and its coach, Clem Haskins, received a seven-year ban.

Ohio State's Jim Tressel would be Dohrmann's third scalp, though he had more than a little help in taking it.

In March of this year, three months after the press conference announcing the player suspensions at OSU, Yahoo's Charles Robinson and Dan Wetzel broke the story that Tressel had known for months about the gear swapping by members of his team. This touched off a feeding frenzy by other outlets, notably the *Columbus Dispatch*, ESPN, and the OSU student newspaper, *The Lantern*.

By April, Dohrmann had become convinced that no other reporter was pushing the tattoo parlor angle far enough, so he flew to Columbus and began asking questions. On May 27, a Friday, Dohrmann phoned Ohio State with the allegations his reporting had turned up: that, going back to 2002, significantly more players than had been reported had traded memorabilia for tattoos, including nine who were currently on the team. On Sunday, the university responded to Dohrmann with a statement from athletic director Gene Smith that distanced the school from Tressel. The next day, Tressel resigned.

Dohrmann's scoop earned him plaudits from the sports journalism community at large, but there were detractors. Deadspin's Tommy Craggs and Fox Sports's Jason Whitlock, both outspoken critics of the NCAA generally—Craggs has prophesied its ultimate demise—and of the Scandal Beat specifically, publicly attacked the *SI* exposé. Whitlock, fomenting on Twitter, called it a “typical slave-catcher investigation,” and mocked what he perceived to be Dohrmann's and *Sports Illustrated*'s efforts to take credit for Tressel's firing. Craggs, in a blog post, said Dohrmann represented a “passel of excellent journalists” who had “turned themselves once again into mall cops for the NCAA.”

Dohrmann doesn't see it quite that way. “If he means we go get things the NCAA's enforcement staff doesn't, he is correct,” Dohrmann says. “If he feels that we are doing the NCAA's job, this would be like saying *The New York Times* is the Justice Department's mall cop.”

Still, Dohrmann has his own misgivings about the Scandal Beat. “Of course the NCAA can change and it does change slightly, and stories that show wrongdoing force small changes,” he says. “Now, every compliance arm in the country is dealing with tattoos. When I wrote about academic fraud in Minnesota, I am sure every school in the country tightened up its academic counseling department. Small changes occur because of the scandal. Are there macro changes, like paying athletes, because enough of these scandals get broken? It is possible. I just have no faith.”

### Beyond the Scandal Beat

The paradox that Dohrmann describes—he both defends the work and acknowledges its limitations in getting at the underlying problems—came up time and again in my conversations with Scandal Beat writers.

Rick Telander, the *Chicago Sun-Times* sports columnist whose 1989 book, *The Hundred Yard Lie*, argued that big-time college football should remove its threadbare veil of amateurism, puts a finer point on the discrepancy, calling the rules violations the “crumbs of the problem.” He says: “The big muffin is right in front of us every day. We know it and accept it, so that's where all the craziness starts. We accept the Big Lie, so we are dazzled and amazed by the little lies. I have found that completely self-defeating and really it hasn't changed.”

In this way, the Scandal Beat sets its own trap. It produces important stories that fit into a celebrated tradition of muck-raking and watchdog reporting. They are the kinds of stories that win prizes and generate traffic. Most of the reporters who do them have been reared in an industry whose professional code demands “objectivity,” a sort of bloodless presentation of the facts that, at its worst, can reduce an obvious injustice to a he said, she said cop-out. The result is straightforward coverage of the NCAA and its rules—and the inevitable violations of those rules—rather than coverage that challenges the validity of the rules themselves, and the system that upholds them.

There are journalistic efforts to come at the ills of college athletics from the less sensational but potentially more

fruitful direction of economic justice. For about five years, the *Indianapolis Star*'s investigative reporter Mark Alesia covered the NCAA, which is based in Indianapolis, as a quasi-beat, tailoring his focus to the underlying economic issues, as opposed to matters of enforcement. In 2006, he wrote a series of stories that scrutinized the astounding fact that less than 1 percent of the NCAA's athletes produce more than 90 percent of its revenue.

In 2008, Alesia moved to a news-side investigative beat and his work on the NCAA largely ended. These days, only *USA Today* follows the money of college sports as a matter of practice, annually updating a database of head coach salaries and athletic department budgets. The newspaper's reporters mine the data for stories that probe the commerce of college sports. Other outlets have only occasionally delved into the economic-justice angle. Two years ago, ESPN's investigative program *Outside the Lines* and ESPN.com jointly produced a month-long series, “Mixed Messages,” which dissected examples of the NCAA's economic one-sidedness, including the contentions of the Ed O'Bannon lawsuit. In July, ESPN.com returned to the subject with a five-day series on athlete compensation called “Pay to Play.” And last March, during the NCAA men's basketball tournament, PBS's *Frontline* took a whack at the question of paying players. In one poignantly ticklish moment, correspondent Lowell Bergman challenged NCAA President Mark Emmert to reveal his salary on air, which Emmert huffily declined.

Tim Franklin, the former editor of both the *Orlando Sentinel* and *The Baltimore Sun* who recently stepped down as head of the National Sports Journalism Center at Indiana University, talks of the need to broaden the sports beat, to bring other perspectives to the coverage. “It is critical for news organizations to have higher education reporters and metro desks looking at this,” Franklin says. “Reporters on financial desks should be reporting on the financial statements of athletic departments. There are thousands of stories in the data in those reports that aren't being done.”

To the extent this more elemental coverage is being done, it is largely drowned out by the endless stream of titillating details pouring from the Scandal Beat. After thirty years of a Groundhog-Day-like chronicling of transgressions and punishments, a once sober journalistic enterprise has in many ways become a source of entertainment, parceling the failings of intercollegiate athletics into the simple, binary terms sports fans can appreciate: winners and losers, sinners and saints. And as Dohrmann says, “Fans actually give a shit about who is and isn't breaking the rules.”

Just as the pioneers who built the Scandal Beat in the 1980s sought to bring the values of public-service journalism to the sports department, the beat's current practitioners face the challenge of how to respond to the difficult truths that their work has helped to lay bare. Because what has become clear is that the most important story in college sports is no longer a sports story at all. **CJR**

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DANIEL LIBIT is a Chicago-based writer. His profile of former Chicago Tribune sports writer Sam Smith, who blogs for the Chicago Bulls, appeared in the May/June 2010 issue of *CJR*.

# Along Recession Road

*Meet some of the people who are  
falling out of the American middle class*

WORDS BY DALE MAHARIDGE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON

To earn rent money, a laid-off single mother in Moulton, Alabama, has a yard sale. She parts with the bed of one daughter who now will sleep double with her sister. In Willoughby, Ohio, a woman who planned to retire is devastated when her investment plans go south. She considers herself lucky to work at Starbucks. In Lavelle, Pennsylvania, college is an expensive dream, probably forever deferred, for a young clerk at a gas station.

These are a few of the people, all tumbling out of the middle class, who photographer Michael S. Williamson found as he drove around the country for his "Recession Road" series for *The Washington Post*. I was not along for the ride this time, but for the past thirty years, Williamson and I have teamed up to document in books and articles the long decline of the American middle class.

It's an essential story. And as a presidential election year nears, it's vital that journalists fully cover that story, as the economy ravages millions. Officially, we're in a "recovery," but one that mostly impacts Wall Street. On Main Street, things remain dire. "The biggest chuckle that I get is when

I tell people, 'I did a story at the peak of the recession two years ago and now I'm following up in the recovery,'" Williamson tells me. "Ninety percent of them laugh in my face. They say: 'Recovery? What recovery?'"

Remember, the Great Depression was really two "great recessions." Between 1933 and 1937 there was a "recovery," though the average American didn't benefit. Larger forces of change were at work—as they are today.

To return to full employment, the US needs to create twenty-one million jobs, according to a 2011 McKinsey & Company report. But eight out of ten of the jobs that will be created between 2009 and 2016 will be low-paying, according to the US Department of Labor. Half will pay less than \$22,000 annually. This isn't a recipe for strengthening the middle class. "We're in an epic, bro'. We're not in a cycle," says Charlie LeDuff, the former *New York Times* reporter and author of the forthcoming *Detroit: An American Autopsy*. "People are withering on the vine."

Yet many are in denial. "It reminds me of when I went to the Soviet Union when it was falling," says Lucian Perkins, the former *Washington Post* photojournalist. "They were living in la-la land, talking about how the Soviet Union was the best country in the world. They didn't know how bad it was. In some ways people in America are the same. They don't realize some of the challenges we face."

It's the job of journalists to show these challenges, says Perkins, a co-founder of "Facing Change: Documenting America," a project affiliated with

the Library of Congress akin to the Farm Security Administration of the 1930s. Perkins says Director Roy Stryker "talked about 'introducing America to Americans.'" It's good advice for today. He says we have to "not only just present the problem, but find people trying to make a difference."

These stories are everywhere. Visit local campgrounds and you'll likely find families who have lost homes. At food banks, you'll find people whose stories you can explore more deeply. News hooks come with the release of economic data.

What follows are a few sketches of middle-class Americans that Williamson photographed for *The Washington Post* during the first half of 2011 by driving around and sleeping in "Tes," his name for the Honda Element leased by the *Post*. He began "Recession Road" on New Year's Eve in Shamokin, Pennsylvania, and he will end it there on January 1, 2012. His pictures were taken with an iPhone in standard mode or, occasionally, the Polaroid application.

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DALE MAHARIDGE and MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON's latest book is *Someplace Like America: Tales From the New Great Depression*, published this year by the University of California Press.





### **The Clothes Off Her Back**

*Moulton, Alabama May 12, 2011 2:13 p.m.*

She is at the side of the road, Michael Williamson says, “with a permanent thousand-yard stare.” Her eyes slowly meet his on his long walk from the car, and she senses he is not a typical customer. “I’m raising funds to live,” Rhonda Walker says. “This is not just for fun.”

The single mother of three had worked at a local furniture store, but the recession was killing business. There were two problems, she explains: people stuck with their worn couches as the economy worsened. And those who did want

to buy too often didn’t qualify for credit. “They laid me off last December and I’ve looked everywhere for a good job, but nothing,” she says. “I am so embarrassed that I have to use food stamps to feed my kids, but what are you going to do?”

She was selling clothes she liked to wear, her children’s toys that they still wanted to play with, and her daughter’s bed. She got \$15 for the bed. “Did she outgrow it?” Williamson asks. “No, no, she loved that bed. I’m desperate. She can share with her sister.”



### **The Fix Is In**

*Lutz, Florida June 23, 2011 3:10 p.m.*

After having no luck finding a well-paying job, Greg Perrini made ends meet by doing yardwork. Then he learned that mortgage companies and banks need workers to maintain foreclosed homes.

Most of the houses that he keeps presentable are places where the owner was evicted or just walked away. The homes then fall prey to vandals and thieves, sometimes almost instantly. "I'm not going to lie to you. I'm doing better these

days because somebody's life fell apart," he says. "But what do you expect me to do, turn down work? I do a good job, and I'm cheap."

There are thousands of homes in foreclosure in central Florida where Perrini is based, so he doesn't expect to be out of work anytime soon. "Look, I'm really sorry about this real estate mess. But, hey, I got kids to feed, you know?"

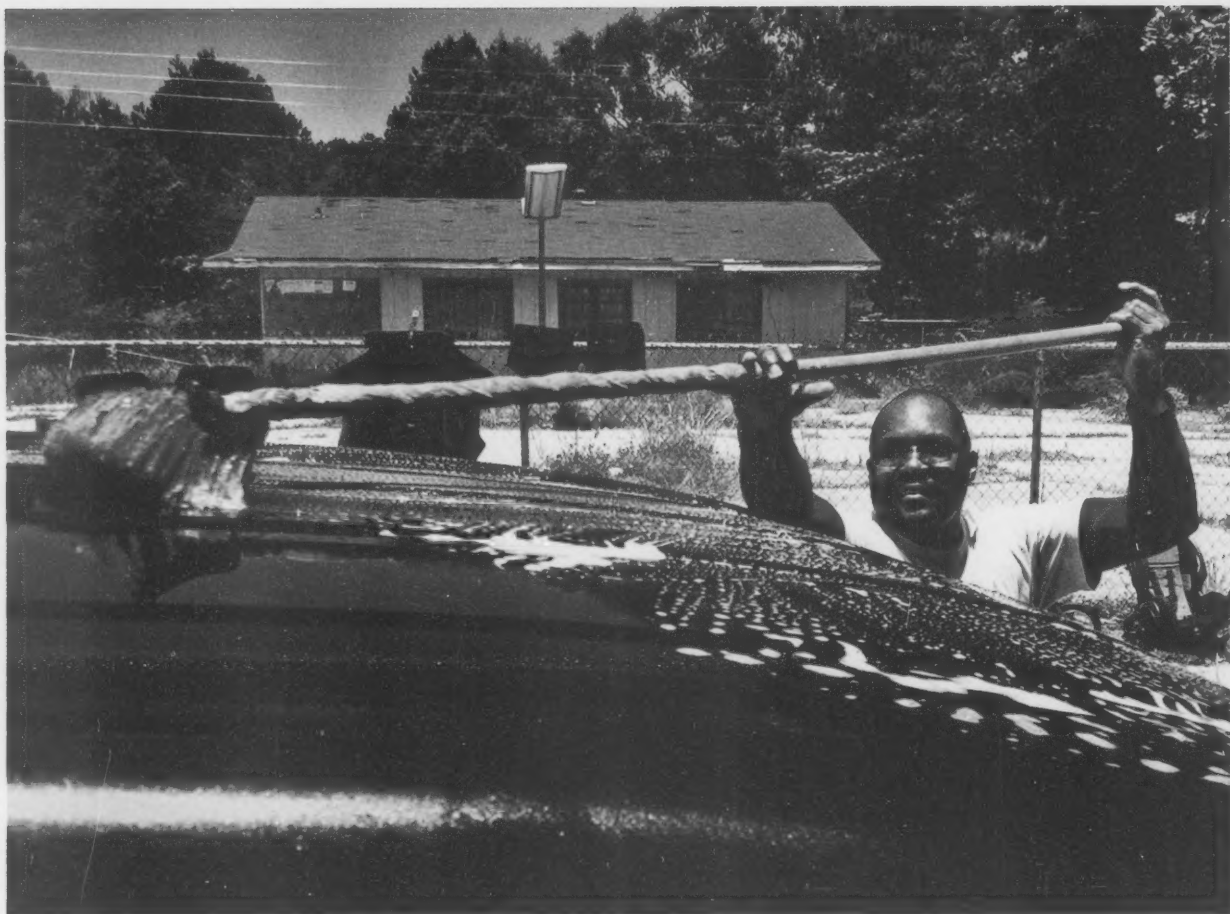


### **Window to the Future**

*Lavelle, Pennsylvania January 1, 2011 12:39 a.m.*

Williamson left Shamoken, Pennsylvania, after New Year's Eve. He was driving lonely backroads to the east and came to this town with a population of 649. A man smoking a cigarette outside this mini-mart was the boyfriend of Samantha Nevick, who cleans windows as part of her job as a clerk on the overnight shift. The boyfriend was there to protect her from drunks he suspected might be out on the holiday.

Nevick, in her early twenties and from a middle-class family, wanted to go to college to study forensic science, in the hope that one day she might be a crime-scene investigator. She had trouble getting loans and so her plans are on hold. Her family doesn't have the money to pay for school. "I might just settle for working here," she says, "and hope I make manager someday."



### Soap Opera

Lowndesboro, Alabama May 28, 2011 10:13 a.m.

After growing up in Arlington, Virginia, Sam Gordon came to live near his extended family in Alabama. He found a tight job market, so Gordon decided to create a job. He rigged a mobile car wash (pulled behind his truck on a small trailer) out of a 250-gallon water tank, a generator for a spray hose, various brushes, and a dozen different soaps and waxes.

When Williamson came across him, Gordon was on US Highway 80 between Selma and Montgomery, the route of the famous 1965 civil rights march. "For fifteen bucks, I will wash the holy heck out of your car," he says. "Just a few years ago I could make a hundred dollars before noon. Cars were lined up; there was an hour wait. Now I only get about three

cars a day. I understand it. I mean if money is tight, you're going to wash your own car.

"You know, there is a byproduct of this recession people aren't thinking about. There's a demasculinization of the American male. The jobs that are available, they're in fast food, cleaning motel rooms. Women get those jobs." He emphasized that he was not against women working. "But a guy's not being a guy anymore. There are a lot of households here in the South where the man is unemployed and is feeling worthless. People are underestimating what that can do to a culture."





### **Sad Movie**

*Abingdon, Virginia June 18, 2011 9:43 p.m.*

Barbara Faulkner, the general manager at the Moonlite Theatre, counts the evening receipts inside the ticket booth. She said that the Moonlite drive-in, built in 1948, has survived the advent of television, video, the DVD, and even the construction of the interstate highway that put it off the beaten path.

But what has her worried these days is the recession. "People are hurting because there are no jobs and gas prices are high. Going to the movies is a luxury, so in turn we are cutting it real close," she says. "We have damage to our

sign and screen from the last bad storm but right now there's no money for repairs."

She explains that the theater makes almost no money from ticket sales. The concession stand accounts for their small profit. "We don't show 'R'-rated movies because we need families to come here. It's the young kids who want the candy. If they aren't allowed in, we make much less. Half of the staff is volunteers because they love it here. Gosh, if we had to pay everybody, we'd be dark by now."

# A Closed Door

*From the EPA to the FDA, Obama fails to deliver on his promise of transparency in science*

BY CURTIS BRAINARD

In July 2009, just months after President Obama took office promising to revolutionize government transparency, leaders of the Society of Environmental Journalists participated in an hour-long conference call with public-affairs staffers working for Lisa Jackson, the new head of the Environmental Protection Agency. Jackson's office wanted to hear what the reporters' gripes were when it came to access, and Christy George, then the society's

president, and her colleagues obliged, outlining their most persistent problems: the requirement to seek permission for interviews with agency scientists and experts, and difficulty arranging those interviews; the requirement to have press officers, or "minders," on the phone during interviews; and the glacial pace of processing Freedom of Information Act requests. Jackson's assistants asked for the benefit of the doubt. "We're not the Bush administration," George recalled them saying. "Those days are left behind."

For a while it seemed that might be true. The agency finally released a ruling, suppressed by the administration of George W. Bush, which states that greenhouse gas emissions endanger public welfare by contributing to climate change, and therefore can be regulated under the Clean Air Act. And it took smaller but appreciated measures, like opening more lines on press calls to accommodate reporters from smaller outlets and conducting those calls later in the

day to accommodate reporters on the West Coast.

Unfortunately, the honeymoon was short-lived. One of the first signs of distress came during a January 2010 press call to discuss the EPA's new budget. The agency surprised reporters by declaring that everyone on the line except Jackson was speaking on background. When members of the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) later complained, two press officers conceded that the on-background rule was foolish, as George reported in an issue of group's quarterly newsletter. Yet the agency pulled the same stunt three months later. Then things got even worse.

Responding to President Obama's Open Government Directive, which ordered executive departments and agencies to "take specific actions to implement the principles of transparency, participation, and collaboration," the EPA launched two websites to solicit public comments about how to fulfill that obligation. In March 2010, SEJ weighed in with a list of nine recommendations. Days later, during the group's next conference call with the agency, Adora Andy, the EPA press secretary at the time, "scolded us for daring to comment publicly on their transparency policies," says Ken Ward Jr., chairman of the group's Freedom of Information Task Force, who participated in the call. Moreover, Andy threatened to break off the discussions between the EPA and the society (she never did, and the talks are ongoing). "I was shocked," says Ward, a reporter at *The Charleston Gazette* in West Virginia. "Here we were

talking about concerns that journalists have about the lack of transparency. Then we dutifully submit public comments about the way we thought they should interact with the press, and EPA hammers us for it. To me, it showed that EPA just doesn't get transparency."

Ward isn't the only one feeling let down. After Obama issued a number of directives designed to improve general transparency and access on his first day in office, he homed in on science, the environment, and public health as areas needing particular improvement. The focus was a no-brainer. The Bush administration had earned a reputation for quashing the free flow of scientific information. In what became the most infamous example of its meddling, top NASA climate scientist James Hansen told *The New York Times* in 2006 that the administration had tried to stop him from speaking out about the threat of global warming by ordering the space agency's public affairs staff to review his upcoming

lectures, papers, and online postings. Today, a slew of reporters complain that such gag orders are still a problem and that transparency and access to information is often just as bad, if not worse in some cases, than it was under the Bush administration.

A survey of science, health, and environmental journalists, conducted by CJR and ProPublica, suggests that while his record so far is more mixed than the anecdotal evidence from journalists indicates, President Obama has clearly not lived up to his promise on transparency and access. As has been the case on many fronts with Obama, the expectations among journalists that things were going to improve were so high, a failure to live up to those expectations was almost inevitable.

We surveyed a random sample of members of SEJ, the Association of Health Care Journalists, the National Association of Science Writers, and Investigative Reporters and Editors on several issues, including the processing of Freedom of Information Act requests, access to experts, and overall transparency. Responses were anonymous and nearly four hundred journalists responded out of the roughly 2,100 selected to participate. (Survey results reflect the opinions of those who responded, and may not reflect the opinions of the entire sample.) Those who responded were seasoned, with nineteen years in journalism on average, including an average of fourteen years covering science, environment, or health beats. Most respondents were either full-time staffers or freelancers for print or online publications.

To some extent, the survey contradicts the impressions of journalists who complain that the situation is worse under Obama than it was under Bush. Neither administration was rated "strong" or "very strong" in any category by a majority of respondents. But overall, Obama received higher marks in nearly every category. Thirty percent gave Obama a "poor" or "very poor" grade on overall transparency and access to information, compared to 44 percent for the Bush administration. Most—42 percent—gave Obama a "fair" grade overall.

Likewise, Obama got better marks than Bush in four specific categories of transparency and access: interview permissions, interview minders, online databases, and processing FOIA requests. Unsurprisingly, given his directive to make more government information available online, Obama showed the greatest amount of improvement over Bush in the databases category, with 31 percent giving the administration a "strong" or "very strong" grade. Progress in the other categories was small to insignificant, however, and in each one most respondents gave both Obama and Bush of "poor" or "very poor." Respondents with more experience tended to have harsher opinions, giving the Obama administration generally lower marks.

MARGINAL PROGRESS, HOWEVER, DOES NOT AN OPEN GOVERNMENT make, and the fact that a third of survey participants said Obama is basically doing a poor job overall does not bode well for the free flow of information. His administration is clearly trying, just not quite as hard as he suggested it would.

Felice Freyer, for instance, who chairs the Association of Health Care Journalists' Right to Know Committee, says

the committee's effort to fight secrecy has followed a course nearly identical to the one described by leaders of SEJ. In April 2010, the association began a series of meetings and phone calls with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) about improving access to federal experts. But progress has been difficult to elusive.

Responding to Obama's calls for openness, the FDA created a Transparency Task Force a few months after his inauguration. The health-care association joined ten other journalism organizations and more than two dozen individual journalists to send a letter to the task force demanding that it end the requirements that journalists obtain permission to conduct an interview, and that public information officers listen to interviews. Six months later, representatives of the association met with Jenny Backus, who became the top press secretary at HHS, to voice some of the same concerns. Backus defended the department's policies requiring interview permissions and minders, but expressed a desire

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## Efforts to codify the rules of access and transparency may make the situation worse.

to work with the press. "She gave us her line about, 'We really want to help reporters, and we believe in transparency,'" Freyer says. "She even told me that HHS believed the regional media were important, and that it wasn't just talking to *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. But she also promised us a list of all the media contacts in HHS, and then never delivered. She talked about having us come to meet with the department's public information officer at this convention in September. She said she'd look into it, and then never did. So she never really followed up on most of what she promised."

Such neglect has real-world consequences. Around the same time, Freyer was working on a story for *The Providence Journal*, where she's been the medical reporter since 1989. Ten percent of the obstetrician-gynecologists in Rhode Island had admitted to inserting a type of intrauterine device (IUD), a form of birth control, into hundreds of women, which had not been approved by the FDA for use in the United States and which they'd obtained illegally at discount prices from foreign sources. The FDA launched an investigation, about which Freyer had questions. Unsure which press officer to approach, she filled out the "Timely Response E-mail Form" on the agency's website. Several hours passed with no response, so she called and spoke with a press officer. He suggested that Freyer e-mail her questions to him, which she did. Nothing. When she called again two days later, the press officer said he was waiting for a response from his superiors.

He suggested that she resubmit her questions for a third time. She did, to no effect. Several more days passed and she sent yet another e-mail asking if she could expect answers, and if not, why. "At this point, all we can say is that the FDA is continuing to look into these cases," the press officer replied.

Freyer recounted the saga in an online article for the AHCIJ:

I published my story, stating that the FDA had declined to answer any questions. Four days later, the FDA posted a 'consumer update' on its website referring to the Rhode Island controversy and warning consumers against IUDs.... It turned out the FDA's position was not the 'No comment' I received. The agency had quite a lot to say on the matter, but had declined to say it in the newspaper serving the hundreds of women throughout Rhode Island who were distressed and frightened by the IUD incident. They deserved better from the agency that was supposed to be protecting them.

Freyer e-mailed the press officer with whom she'd corresponded as well as the FDA's chief press officer to ask what had happened. When neither replied, she e-mailed Backus at HHS, who finally got the FDA to apologize for its unresponsiveness and promise to do better. Backus was replaced shortly thereafter, however. As Freyer put it, the association had to "start all over again," and transparency problems have continued under Backus's successor, Richard Sorian.

At the beginning of 2011, for instance, the FDA stunned reporters while announcing changes to its medical-device approval process. The announcement was under embargo and the agency's press officers barred journalists seeking outside comment from sharing information about the changes with experts until the embargo lifted. The association wrote a

letter of protest, pointing out that the prohibition "rewrote a long-standing compact between reporters and various public and scientific organizations," which typically allows reporters to share embargoed material with sources while working on their stories. Members of the Right to Know Committee pressed the matter, and in June the FDA reversed course. Around the same time, HHS also finally released the list of senior media officials in each of its divisions, which the association had been requesting for about a year.

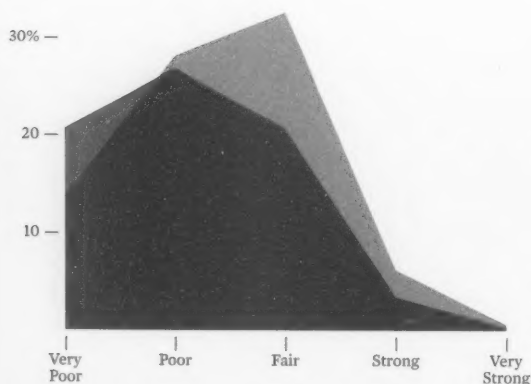
Despite these victories, and the launch of what will be ongoing quarterly conversations with HHS's public affairs staff, Freyer is unsure how much progress has been made. "The big issue is that reporters who've been at this for a while remember being able to call up and talk to the people who actually knew what was going on, not just spokespeople, and that's become increasingly difficult," she says. "So I don't see milestones here. It's been an ongoing problem that we're chipping away at."

The Obama administration's transparency problem not only affects access to federal scientists and highly politicized environmental and medical science. It's also about access to government documents and databases, and basic research. In 2006, allegations emerged that an electron microscopy research group at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, which receives millions of dollars a year from the Department of Energy, had fabricated data. Suspecting lax oversight, freelance reporter Eugenie Samuel Reich, now a contributing correspondent for the journal *Nature*, filed a FOIA request for files related to the ensuing investigation, which had been initiated and organized by the lab itself. The Department of Energy rejected the request, so Reich bided

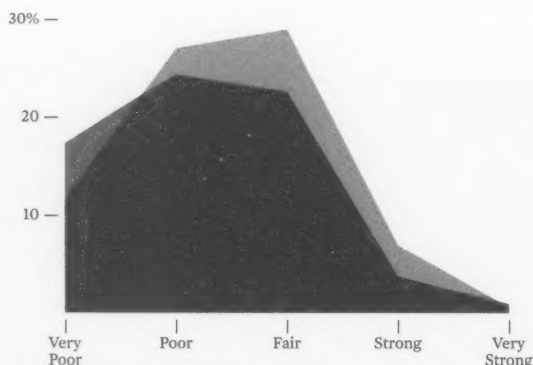
## Open Government?

How would you rate the Bush/Obama administrations in terms of:

ACCESS TO SOURCES WITHOUT NEED FOR  
CLEARANCE OR PERMISSION



ABILITY TO CONDUCT INTERVIEWS WITHOUT  
PRESS OFFICE 'MINDERS'





her time until the 2008 presidential election ushered in a new administration. When Obama made his pledge about openness and then appointed Steven Chu and a number of other “scientists with excellent reputations” to the department, she believed there would be a “change of heart.” There wasn’t. Reich filed a lawsuit under the FOIA in 2009, which a federal district judge in Boston finally dismissed in April of this year, to her amazement.

## Changing the culture of secrecy is a lot harder than simply redecorating the Oval Office.

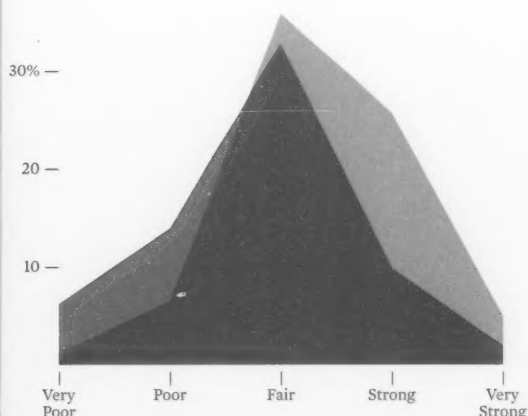
“This record had nothing to do with national security—not even the government claims it does—so it is a very good test case of how other, non-security-related records are being handled,” Reich says. “The government’s court filings have been relentless and extraordinary, with numerous deliberate references to the need for privacy, confidentiality, and respecting the proprietary rights of government contractors.”

Some of President Obama’s most vociferous critics on the transparency front will grudgingly concede, as our survey seemed to suggest, that his administration has made marginal progress. “A lot of colleagues would stone me for saying this,

but it actually has gotten better,” says Joe Davis, the director of the SEJ’s Freedom of Information Project. “And I think one of the most illustrative cases in point is the one about coal ash.” In December 2008, a coal-ash containment pond at a power plant in Tennessee burst, spreading toxic waste across hundreds of acres and dozens of homes. The spill was the last skirmish in the society’s long battle over transparency and access with the Bush EPA, which took eleven days to release the results of its first tests of the sludge. An agency official under the new Obama administration promised to do better, but in June 2009, SEJ accused the EPA of “hiding” a list of high-hazard, coal-ash impoundments across the country, some of which posed potential threats to residential communities. At first, the agency echoed the post-September 11 Bush line about guarding the information for national security reasons. “Terrorists were less of a threat than a good rainstorm, which might sweep away any of those impoundments,” Davis says. “But eventually they released the list, so we have that information and the communities [near the impoundments] know about them, and maybe safety measures will be put in place. That information would not have come out under the Bush administration. That’s the difference. However, I will also say in my next breath that the Obama administration hasn’t lived up to its promises. They raised our expectations so high and the distance we’ve come is disappointingly short.”

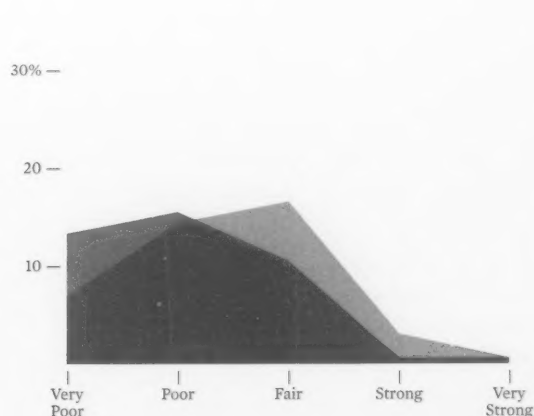
One thing that helped raise those expectations was the memo that President Obama sent to John Holdren, then awaiting confirmation as director of the White House’s Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), in March 2009. It directed him to draft a plan to improve scientific integrity throughout the executive branch. A key provision was the

ACCESS TO ONLINE DATABASES



Bush (n=322) Obama (n=322)

SPEED OF PROCESSING FOIA REQUESTS



Bush (n=320) Obama (n=318)

development of a public communications plan. Obama gave Holdren 120 days to complete the assignment. Now, more than two years later, the plan is still not in place. In August 2010, more than a year after they were due, the Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility—a nonprofit alliance of local, state, and federal natural resource professionals—submitted a FOIA request to Holdren's office for a copy of the recommendations and related policy documents. After two months passed with nothing from OSTP, the group sued.

Finally, last December, Holdren released a memo providing guidance to departments and agencies about how to improve scientific integrity and openness. The document immediately drew criticism from transparency watchdogs for "legitimizing," as the SEJ put it, interview permissions and minders. A few days later, OSTP released the related policy documents—meeting notes, progress reports, congressional testimony—that the public employees group had requested. They were heavily redacted, but in the snippets that weren't SEJ's Joe Davis saw the fingerprints of a suspect he believes has played a key role in thwarting progress toward openness and access over multiple administrations: the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which has the power to review and approve programs, policies, and procedures throughout the executive branch.

The documents that OSTP released revealed that, in fact, Holdren and company had sent their transparency recommendations to OMB by June 2009, on schedule to meet Obama's original deadline, and that the effort foundered there. More than a year later, the two offices were still trying to settle on a final draft of the recommendations, which weren't released until December 2010, more than seventeen months behind schedule. Last May, Holdren once again extended the deadline for departments and agencies to submit draft policies, which were due around the time this article went to press.

"OMB, an agency with very little in-house scientific expertise, has been monkeying with science for a very long time, and asserting authority over the science process in the federal government," Davis says. "It provides an ideal mechanism for interference."

There are other mechanisms. Even in departments and agencies with special expertise in the sciences, there is often an entrenched corps of civil servants that resists transparency and access—often as a result of turf battles and a sense that bosses, and their edicts, come and go—and survives from one administration to the other. New appointments often do nothing to help matters. Numerous reporters pointed out that the top press officers at departments and agencies often are recruited from a president's campaign staff, with disastrous results. "They want to run government agencies like they're political campaigns and they don't seem to understand that there ought to be a difference," says SEJ's Ken Ward Jr. "All the information that EPA has about its inspections, its enforcement, its science—that belongs to the public."

Changing the culture of secrecy is a lot harder than redefining the Oval Office. Some watchdogs believe that transparency and access have steadily diminished since the 1970s, as successive administrations clamped down more tightly, and with a greater sophistication, on the free flow of information

to the public. Indeed, many veteran reporters I spoke to think that the very establishment of press policies and guidelines, not unlike those that Obama called for, are what led to problems in the first place. These edicts were supposed to open and streamline communication between government and the press, but by codifying practices such as the dreaded interview permissions and minders, they actually gave government a mechanism to block journalists when it was politically pragmatic to do so. In early August, for example, the EPA finally released its scientific integrity proposal, as per John Holdren's instruction. But it did exactly what transparency watchdogs feared: it encouraged scientists to interact with the press, but required that they inform their superiors about those interactions and instructed public affairs staff to "attend interviews," thereby formalizing the permissions and minders policy that journalists complain about.

CONTRARY TO THE NOTION THAT OBAMA WOULD, AS HE promised, usher in a sea change in terms of transparency, there is a case to be made that, when it comes to controlling information via press policies, Obama is the savviest practitioner ever. Consider his adroit use of digital media as a defining example. His Open Government Directive made an unprecedented amount of federal scientific data available online. His administration touts that accomplishment as proof of transparency, but critics say that is disingenuous. In practice, the databases demonstrate how the Obama administration treats communication as a one-way street. Data, after all, rarely speak for themselves and reporters want, more than anything, to talk to the officials who collected and analyzed them. As Felice Freyer found out when she attempted to speak with the FDA about its investigation of unapproved intrauterine devices, however, the administration often prefers to publish statements online, or via social media, than make them directly available to journalists. It's a duplicitous game that allows Obama to claim that his administration is living up to its promises. Yet almost any science reporter in the country will tell you that nothing could be further from the truth, and that even if the Office of Science and Technology Policy produces a plan for scientific integrity and transparency, it could make matters worse, not better.

Reporters on the science beat may have to accept that the days of easy access are gone—and plenty of them already do. Groups like the Society of Environmental Journalists and the Association of Health Care Journalists are still pushing for an end to interview permissions and minders, as well they should. But even their most optimistic members merely cross their fingers, knowing that if they held their breath, they'd surely expire. **CJR**

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CURTIS BRAINARD edits *The Observatory*, CJR's online critique of science and environmental journalism. He is a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists and the National Association of Science Writers, two of the organizations surveyed. This article was produced in partnership with ProPublica ([propublica.org](http://propublica.org)), whose director of computer-assisted reporting, Jennifer LeFleur, analyzed the survey data. For complete survey results and additional coverage, visit [cjr.org/the\\_observatory](http://cjr.org/the_observatory).

# All the President's Pundits

*When the White House tries to shape, seduce, and spin, what's a journalist to do?*

BY PAUL STAROBIN

On a Thursday evening this past May, Eliot Spitzer, hosting his now-cancelled CNN show, lobbed a chummy question to his studio guest Fareed Zakaria—an opinion columnist for *The Washington Post*, an editor-at-large for *Time*, a best-selling book author, and the host of *Fareed Zakaria GPS*, a weekly CNN show on foreign affairs. “Look, I read something in the paper this week,” Spitzer said. “It said that the president of the United States calls

you for wisdom and advice about issues around the world. So first, when he calls you, what does he say? ‘Hi Barack, calling for Fareed?’”

Zakaria helpfully responded: “Mostly it’s been face to face meetings, usually organized by Tom Donilon, the national security advisor. What I’m struck by though, honestly, Eliot, is how much time he is spending thinking about the issues of the Arab Spring... It’s been a very thoughtful conversation, we’ll see where it goes.”

“I’m not going to ask you what you have said to the president,” Spitzer closed. “But it makes my heart warm that the president is calling you for wisdom and advice.”

On one level, there was nothing surprising about this exchange. Zakaria, “the most influential foreign-policy adviser of his generation,” as the *Esquire* quote on his website reads, has a well-established track record for offering private advice to high-level policymakers. “If a senator calls me up

and asks me what should we do in Iraq, I’m happy to talk to him,” he told *The New York Times* back in 2006.

But let’s step back. Is it appropriate for a journalist, even an opinion columnist, to give confidential advice to a president? And what’s up with Obama seeking advice from scribes like Zakaria?

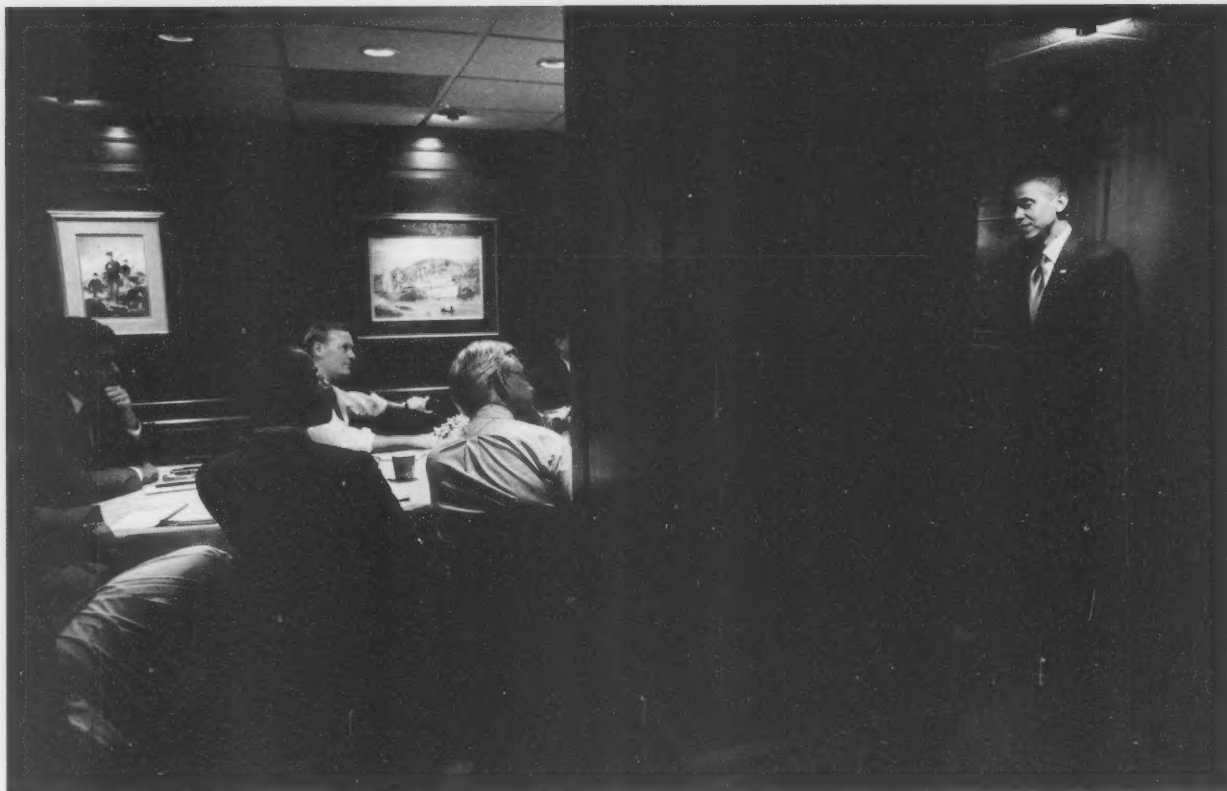
These questions go to one of the murkiest corners of the media landscape—the rules and practices of political punditry. History suggests that punditry is a form of journalism that can be particularly ripe for manipulation by presidents with a natural interest in shaping opinion coverage to burnish their images and advance their goals. And Obama, it seems, for all his reputation for being somewhat aloof, is very much an actor in this game of courtship—with the pundits themselves, operating by their own personal codes of conduct, mostly willing to play along. They shouldn’t always be.

THE TERM PUNDIT ITSELF IS APPROPRIATELY exotic—it comes from the Sanskrit *pandita*, for “learned” person. The popular image of a pundit suggests a wide-bottomed sort, office thumb in mouth, conjuring political opinion from some ethereal cloud.

In fact, the best pundits do their own first-hand reporting, including visits to hot spots like war zones. Still, punditry long has been, and still is, a classic form of access journalism, with the most influential pundits scooping up valuable tidbits from high-level sources in Washington, with the president, of course, at the top of the pinnacle.

The most famous of the type was Walter Lippmann, renowned for his extensive involvements with a string of presidents from Woodrow Wilson to Lyndon Johnson. Lippmann had no compunction about offering them private advice, and neither did another bigwig syndicated columnist from the age, Joseph Alsop. At the Democrats’ 1960 convention, Alsop barged into nominee John F. Kennedy’s hotel suite to press the case for Johnson as the best pick for vice president. Alsop then, typically, filed a column on the VP choices facing Kennedy—without any mention of his own behind-the-scenes machinations. Nor was he above pulling punches in his column (written with his brother Stewart, for a time) to stay in the good graces of JFK, who supped on caviar and Moët & Chandon as a dinner guest at Joe’s Georgetown home.

For such writers, a dual role as private advisor in a presidential braintrust and tutor to the public at large was all



**In the club** President Obama talks to journalists in a dining room at the White House Navy Mess, May 21, 2009.

part of a seamless web of responsibilities, borne as members of an elite establishment that regarded itself as the rightful steward of the nation. In certain respects, the era of the Lippmanns and Alsops is over—in this age of partisan polarization, the establishment is certainly not what it once was. And yet there remain the Zakarias of today—a “throwback,” says Evan Thomas, recently retired from nearly a quarter century at *Newsweek*, to the time “when journalists really were members of the establishment.”

Yet for all the changes of the digital age, old media has more clout than might be thought. Today’s syndicated columnists, operating in a media culture defined more than ever by opinions, have their work appear not only in print but also on newspaper websites. Their writing is extracted, summarized, and linked by numerous other political sites. E. J. Dionne, who has been writing columns for *The Washington Post* since 1993, figures that he now has the potential to reach “a bigger audience” than Lippmann ever did. David Brooks, with a syndicated *New York Times* column and regular weekly political wrap-up gigs on National Public Radio (with Dionne) and on the *PBS NewsHour* (with Mark Shields), is an omnipresent opinion-dispensing megaphone to all close—and millions of casual—followers of American politics. When he devoted his July 5 *Times* column to a plea for Republicans to accept revenue increases as part of a deal to raise the debt limit, *Politico* quickly followed with an entire story on reactions from prominent voices in the blogosphere.

So traditional print columnists still matter—and, for sure, are perceived to matter by the political powers that be—for a reputed ability to influence public opinion. And in the Barack Obama White House, after a 2008 campaign relying heavily on the new tools of social, interactive media and, as ever, television images, the most prominent columnists have been assiduously courted from his first days in office. “I think their feeling was that, even in this world of infinite voices, there are X number of people who shape what we do as a society,” with the columnists as a key segment of that elite, said Ronald Brownstein, a *National Journal* columnist who has spent time with the president and key advisors. It may be, Brownstein added, that Obama took a media-strategy page from Bill Clinton’s playbook: “You campaign in television and you govern in print.”

As part of this governance strategy, certain columnists come to be seen as political proxies, with Brooks, on the center-right, viewed as a stand-in for independent voters open to persuasion from Obama, and Brooks’s *Times* colleague, Paul Krugman, on the liberal end of the spectrum, seen as the embodiment of a restive Democratic base.

Today’s columnists, as ever, frankly treasure their presidential access. “To me, the big temptation is, if you’re tough in your columns, they won’t invite you over any more,” Brooks said. He added, though, that Obama had not displayed a punitive streak: “I don’t think it’s necessary to soften what you think.”

Indeed, the president has a reputation for straightforward,



wide-ranging dealings with the pundits. He typically meets them in off-the-record sessions with either one particular columnist or about a half dozen at a time. He's not known as a leaker, willing to drop some juicy bit of inside, not yet public, information. "In many ways, he thinks like a columnist," with an interest "in what ideas are hitting" in the political culture, Brooks said.

"They've been pretty philosophical discussions—not on the news of the day," Jonathan Alter, an ex-*Newsweek* columnist now with Bloomberg and an MSNBC analyst, said of his off-record talks. One, held in the Roosevelt Room in the summer of 2010, focused on education policy and was also attended by Brooks and Joe Klein of *Time* among others.

Alter also pointed to a difference in style between the respective approaches to the pundits of Obama and Bill Clinton, also a Democrat but a very different kind of cat in dealings with journalists. "He doesn't really kiss our ass, and I respect him for that," Alter said of Obama. Clinton, even though he seemed at heart to despise the press, sometimes flattered the pundits—"He's just a seducer in every part of his life," Alter noted.

But while Obama may be a soft or even an indifferent seller, he had by his side in his first two years in office a salesman *extraordinaire*—his irrepressible chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel. Now Chicago's mayor, he was a legend among the pundits for a morning to midnight full-court press (usually pushing column ideas) via the telephone, e-mail, and face-to-face talk-fests. During the health care debate, for example, Emanuel pounded home the notion that the lack of a public option shouldn't be a litmus test for whether any final piece of legislation truly was progressive or not. (His successor, William Daley, is more apt to leave such outreach to others in the White House.)

At the same time, this administration, just like its predecessors, shamelessly uses every perk at its disposal to win pundits' favor. Take state dinner invitations, the most treasured party pass in Washington. The scorecard is running at two invites for Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times* (India and China affairs), and one each for Zakaria (India), Dionne (Germany), David Ignatius of *The Washington Post* (China), Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times* (China), and James Fallows of *The Atlantic* (China). At the reception line, the pundit is typically introduced by the president to the state leader guest of honor as one of America's most important journalists. Picture the pundit's spouse beaming with pride.

The White House can also offer a ride on Air Force One, the ultimate symbol of presidential power and luxury. Back in February 2009, five columnists got to join Obama for a flight back to Chicago—Dionne and Brownstein along with Clarence Page of *The Chicago Tribune*, Kathleen Parker of *The Washington Post*, and Bob Herbert, then of *The New York Times*. Then there were the eighteen holes that Friedman, whom the president has consulted on Middle East policy, enjoyed with Obama on an Andrews Air Force Base golf course back in the fall of 2009.

And, maybe best of all, there's the book plug. Many pundits write books, whose sales can't be hurt by an endorsement from the Reader in Chief. Typical of his predecessors, Obama

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## 'He doesn't really kiss our ass, and I respect him for that.'

or his aides occasionally lets it be known what the president is reading; the titles have included Alter's *Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope* and Zakaria's *The Post-American World*, which he was photographed holding during the campaign. (The *New York Times* website published the image under the headline, "What Obama Is Reading.") "Our authors have definitely benefited from President Obama's endorsements," said Jonathan Karp, publisher of Simon & Schuster, who noted that Alter's *FDR* book became a trade paperback best-seller "largely as a result" of being on Obama's list.

The attention Obama lavishes on pundits' books can be surprisingly durable. Though he has been referring to Friedman's 2008 book *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution—and How It Can Renew America* since he ran for president, in August 2009, it was included on Obama's official vacation book list. The president, a Harvard Law graduate, is not known to be a slow reader.

WHAT IF ANYTHING, THEN, IS OBAMA GETTING FOR ALL this scripted attention devoted on the pundits? The question is difficult to answer if only because no self-respecting columnist will ever admit to pulling punches to stay in the White House's good graces.

"Some columnists are spinnable," said Peter Baker, a White House reporter for *The New York Times*, who explained that, on occasions, a pundit (he declined to name names) will write a column almost exactly parroting some recent back-ground briefing from senior officials.

Indeed, on occasion, a column is written that seems helpful to Obama when he needs it most. This spring, Obama received sharp criticism from Republicans and Democrats alike for being way too tough on the Israelis after declaring that negotiations with the Palestinians should begin from the 1967 borders. On May 25, Zakaria supportively disagreed, weighing in with a column strongly defending Obama's position and arguing that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should actually be "thanking" the president for "publicly condemning the Palestinian strategy to seek recognition as a state from the UN." Zakaria made no mention in the column of his private meetings with Obama to talk about the Middle East. (He did not respond to requests for an interview, but has said elsewhere that he has refrained from advising Obama "on a specific policy or speech or proposal.")

It's also true that Obama has often taken criticism from pundits he has courted, including on a persistently biting basis from Krugman, not just a columnist but a Nobel Prize winning economist, whose ideas the president has openly solicited and with whom he has privately met in the White

House at least once. The debt-ceiling deal reached in August was "an abject surrender on the part of the President," Krugman wrote. Obama did not win over David Brooks on health care or on the administration's economic stimulus package, and he took a mocking shot from golf-buddy Friedman for caving to Republicans and opening more federal lands for oil exploration. "Great: Let's make America even more dependent on an energy resource," Friedman wrote in May. Zakaria has cast skepticism on Obama's Libya engagement, bluntly warning of "mission creep."

And yet, to hear it from the pundits themselves, Obama does help his cause by explaining his policies and offering a frame of reference for the messy set of decisions he is confronting—if only by getting inside their head when it comes time to write. "It's easy to say that they should do just x, y, and z, but if they're facing constraints, a, b, and c, then you have to account for that, rather than just bashing them," Brooks said. "It does affect what you write."

"Of course, it helps Obama," Dionne said. "Even if he doesn't persuade you on the point, you realize that this is an impressive, intelligent man, who can also be very charming, and warmer in groups like that than he is in public appearances."

PUNDITS ARE DIFFERENT THAN SO-CALLED STRAIGHT journalists in having a license, indeed a duty, to opine, but the columnists are still journalists. So what are the rules that govern, or at least should govern, their encounters with the president and his aides?

For starters, it seems fair to give them wider berth than straight reporters get. If a pundit is having an argument with the president on some policy in a print column, then it doesn't seem wrong to have that argument continued in an actual sit-down with the President.

Still, some rules ought to apply. There should be a rule of proportion in social engagements with the White House. One state dinner? Sure. One golf game? OK. But if this sort of thing becomes a habit, then the pundit, in the public's mind, is sure to look like a crony of the president—who is always going to be seen, correctly, as the vastly more powerful member of this pair.

There also should be a rule of transparency. If pundits are dining or golfing or otherwise meeting with the president, even if off the record, they should bend over backwards to tell the public. Ignatius and Fallows showed how this could be done by providing their readers context and reporting on Hu Jintao's state dinner.

But the occurrence of such encounters is not as thorny, in terms of ethics, as what happens at them. When pundits give specific advice to presidents and their aides in private, they become, in effect, counselors. It's one thing for a columnist to carry on a debate of ideas with the White House—and another to dispense programmatic tips.

The columnists are of different minds on this practice. "Giving advice is tricky," Joe Klein of *Time* acknowledged in an e-mail exchange. "If a president hasn't done something I think might be useful, I'll usually pose it as a question: 'Why

haven't you done such and such?' or 'Why did you do this and not that?' This, I believe, keeps me within the white lines of our craft and broadens my information stash."

And for Klein, there is something like a privilege that even a journalist owes a president, who is not just any politician but, uniquely, the head of state. "Just about every private one-on-one session I've had with a sitting president," Klein recalled, "came after I'd been someplace they couldn't go (at least, not in the same way that I'd been)—to China, Iran, Afghanistan or after I'd spent some time concentrating on a specific issue in the US."

"Such meetings," Klein continued, "tend to be conversations, with the president asking as much as answering. These sessions usually take place after I've written something that has piqued their interest and I don't have any problem with answering a president's questions—indeed, I'm honored to do so."

Against this shades-of-gray view is the purist perspective that private counsel simply should not be offered, no matter the importance of the president. "I am in the business of giving advice to the president twice a week"—in a newspaper column, David Ignatius of *The Washington Post* said. "We're not here to be patriots," he said of his fellow pundits. "We're here to serve our readers and offer the best commentary we can. I think there is a dividing line in life."

From my vantage point—and admittedly it's the perspective of one who has never been asked for advice by a president—the purists have it right: the pundits should save their advice for their columns. Presidents, all presidents, are political animals. The technique of asking advice from pundits seems designed to co-opt them—if not to assure favorable coverage (unlikely), at the least to soften criticism. It's a form of flattery, and the thing about presidential flattery, as Evan Thomas said, is that "it works—it has worked with me, on a human level." Let's face it: while Obama can no doubt glean insights from a Joe Klein, a Tom Friedman, or a Fareed Zakaria, journalists have no monopoly on expertise, and the president has at his fingertips instant access to the world's smartest, most plugged in people, inside and outside his administration. Even Nobel Laureate Krugman surely is more prized by the Obama White House for his media platform than for his policy prescriptions, which are of a standard Keynesian variety.

Beyond that, pundits who offer private advice to presidents risk breaking faith with their readers, from whom the journalists should not make a habit of keeping secrets. On this, I'm with Patrick Pexton, my friend and former editor who is now *The Washington Post's* ombudsman. "I think the White House is a little bit like a flame and we're the moths circling it," Patrick told me, with the "we" referring to all journalists, pundits included. "You have to be careful about getting too close because you could get burned." As for pundits with hearts set on serving Obama as an advisor, there is a ready and an honorable out: give up your jobs in journalism and apply for one with the White House. **CJR**

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PAUL STAROBIN, a former Moscow bureau chief for BusinessWeek, is the author of *After America: Narratives for the Next Global Age*, a book that has not made the presidential reading list.

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## The Story So Far

*What We Know About the  
Business of Digital Journalism*

A REPORT BY

Bill Grueskin  
Dean of Academic Affairs, Columbia Journalism School

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Principal, Quantum Media  
Adjunct Associate Professor, Columbia Business School

Lucas Graves  
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What is making money?

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# Ideas + Reviews

SECOND READ

## Among the Mongers

*Henry Mayhew and the pursuit of history, from the bottom up*

BY JEFFREY GREGGS

There is no place in any era more evocative of soot, steam, gruel, and misery than Victorian London. It is one of the great landscapes of the imagination. This is probably because the mid-century London we know best is the literary London of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, a teeming metropolis plagued by poverty and grime and peopled by the likes of Tiny Tim and Laura Fairlie. This vision of the city—all squalor and desperation—seems almost melodramatic, as if ripped from the pages of a penny dreadful.

The alarming tone isn't particularly surprising, given the actual state of London at the time. For Dickens's fictions were very much rooted in reality: beggars, orphans, and scatter-rats crowded its filthy streets by day, eking out miserable livings (that is, when there were ekings to be had) to take back to mean quarters. Immigrants fleeing the potato famine in Ireland or the lack of work in rural counties came in great number hoping to find jobs, only to add further surplus to a labor pool that already outstripped demand. They came and they never left—there was nowhere else to go. People made do, but there is a reason that the time is remembered as the Hungry Forties. The streets were not a fertile soil.

There are moments at which certain forms of inequity become intolerable to societies; the Victorian era was one such moment. A quick survey of the major issues that dominated English political life from 1815 to 1870 reveals a nation anxious about the consequences of modernization upon its least fortunate members—and aware of the fact that this class of people appeared to be increasing in number. The idealistic spirit of the newly enfranchised middle classes, coupled with the rise of a vocal mass labor movement, eventually led to widespread reform in almost all spheres of public life: in the composition of the electorate, in government-mandated education, in labor laws, in public health, in public safety, and in much else. Queen Victoria did not exchange all of the bricks in London for marble, but, by 1900, it was no longer an act of suicide to drink the water.

One of the great, all-too-neglected artifacts of the era's reformist zeal is Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, a far-ranging, four-volume illustrated catalogue of the city's underclass, largely drawn from the words of the study's subjects themselves. Mayhew's "cyclopædia of the condition and earnings of those that *will* work, those that *cannot* work, and those that *will not* work" is an unmatched, if idiosyncratic, record of a country getting to know itself. The interviews and accounts contained in it depict the clamor and bustle, the liveliness and sorrow, of lower-class London life, as in this passage describing a workmen's market:

Here, alongside the road, are some half-dozen headless tailors' dummies, dressed in Chesterfields and fustian jackets, each labelled, "Look at the prices," or "Observe the quality." After this is a butcher's shop, crimson and white with meat piled up to the first-floor, in front of which the butcher himself, in his blue coat, walks up and down, sharpening his knife on the steel that hangs to his waist. A little further on stands the clean family, begging; the father with his head down as if in shame, and a box of lucifers held forth in his hand.... This stall is green and white with bunches of turnips—that red with apples, the next yellow with onions, and another purple with pickling cabbages. One minute you pass a man with an umbrella turned inside up and full of prints; the next, you hear one with a peepshow of Mazeppa, and Paul Jones the pirate, describing the pictures to the boys looking in at the little round windows. Then is heard the sharp snap of the percussion-cap from the crowd of lads firing at the target for nuts; and the moment afterwards, you see either a black man half-clad in white, and shivering in the cold with tracts in his hand, or else you hear the sounds of musk from "Frazier's Circus," on the other side of the road, and the man outside the door of the penny concert, beseeching you to "Be in time—be in time!" as Mr. Somebody is just about to sing his favourite song of the "Knife Grinder." Such, indeed, is the riot, the struggle, and the scramble for a living,

that the confusion and uproar of the New-cut on Saturday night have a bewildering and saddening effect upon the thoughtful mind.

Fact-finding commissions had reported on the "Condition of England" before (for example, in the Board of Trade's "Blue Books") and such lights as Thomas Carlyle had weighed in on the question. The London press played a part in the conversation, too, with articles, pamphlets, and editorials. But for all their solutions about what was to be done, few writers took the time to understand the objects of their pity; "the poor" under consideration served mainly as mouthpieces for predetermined opinions. Mayhew was the first to develop a form that took a rational approach to the situation and worked as a call to arms all at once. *London Labour* blends together personal observation, oral accounting, and a proto-sociology based on hundreds of interviews conducted by Mayhew and his team, as well as reams of statistical evidence (46,800 pounds of refuse under-waistcoats, mostly destined for the paper mills, were bought, collected, or found in the streets of London annually). It was a revolutionary innovation in journalism—the first real "bottom-up" history ever written—and it remains, in many ways, just as relevant today.

LONDON LABOUR WAS A STORY THAT grew in the telling. Initially, *The Morning Chronicle* commissioned Mayhew to cover the 1849 cholera epidemic in London, the "King Cholera" that killed nearly fifteen thousand of the city's denizens, most of whom resided in slums south of the Thames. Mayhew decided to go directly to the source. Writing as the Metropolitan correspondent from Jacob's Island in Bermondsey—a stew Dickens once described as the "filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London"—Mayhew turned out a forceful polemic arguing that poor sanitation either caused or exacerbated the contagion: "the masses of filth and corruption round the metropolis are... the nauseous nests of plague and pestilence." (A VISIT TO THE CHOLERA DISTRICTS OF DERMONDSEY, *The Morning Chronicle*, Monday, September 24, 1849.)

Mayhew's first dispatch resembles

## Mayhew's prose remains fresh and vital some 160 years down the road because he took the time to observe the simplest of human decencies: he listened.

a traditional opinion piece more than the interview-heavy accounts that are the hallmark of *London Labour*, but it received an overwhelmingly positive response nonetheless. He was put in charge of the London portion of the *Chronicle's* series "Labour and the Poor," which, during the Parliamentary recess in the winter of 1849, regularly made up the majority of the paper's content. (Following their falling out in October 1850, both Mayhew and the *Chronicle's* editors claimed credit for the series's genesis.) Mayhew contributed some eighty letters, at the rate of two or three per week, and, in the course of the concentrated effort such production demanded, his vision began to take shape.

Mayhew's biographer Anne Humphreys maintains that his reputation was at it highest during these months, and the series's reception bears this out. In *Punch* (which Mayhew had helped to found), the author William Makepeace Thackeray called it:

A picture of human life so wonderful, so awful...so exciting and terrible, that readers of romances own they never read anything like to it....[Y]ou and I—we are of the upper classes; we have had hitherto no community with the poor...until some clear-sighted energetic man like the writer of the *Chronicle* travels into the poor man's country for us, and comes back with his tale of terror and wonder. (*Punch*, March 9, 1850)

The series inspired philanthropic societies and political organizations to mount new campaigns, and the offices of the *Chronicle* were flooded with individual donations from readers, usually in response to the particular plight of one or another of Mayhew's subjects. This led to criticism in certain quarters: James Wilson's *Economist* opined that the publication was "unthinkingly in-

creasing the enormous funds already profusely destined to charitable purposes, adding to the number of virtual paupers, and encouraging a reliance on public sympathy for help instead on self-exertion."

Although Mayhew interviewed the innocent and scoundrels alike—although he depicted scenes that highlighted the dignity as much as the pathos of poverty—stories of high heartbreak elicited the greatest reactions. One of his most famous accounts was of an eight-year-old flower seller, a watercress girl, who "although the weather was severe, was dressed in a thin cotton gown, with a threadbare shawl wrapped round her shoulders":

I go about the streets with water-creases, crying, 'Four bunches a penny, water-creases.' I am just eight years old—that's all, and I've a big sister, and a brother and a sister younger than I am. On and off, I've been very near twelvemonth in the streets. Before that, I had to take care of a baby for my aunt....

The creases is so bad now, that I haven't been out with 'em for three days. They're so cold, people won't buy 'em; for when I goes up to them, they say, 'They'll freeze our bellies.' Besides, in the market, they won't sell a ha'penny handful now—they're ris to a penny and tuppence. In summer there's lots, and 'most as cheap as dirt; but I have to be down at Farringdon-market between four and five, or else I can't get any creases, because everyone almost—especially the Irish—is selling them, and they're picked up so quick.... We children never play down there, 'cos we're thinking of our living. No; people never pities me in the street—excepting one gentleman, and he says, says he, 'What do you do out so soon in the morning?' but he gave me nothink—he only walked away.

It's very cold before winter comes on reg'lar—specially getting up of a

morning. I gets up in the dark by the light of the lamp in the court. When the snow is on the ground, there's no creases. I bears the cold—you must; so I puts my hands under my shawl, though it hurts 'em to take hold of the creases, especially when we takes 'em to the pump to wash 'em. No; I never see any children crying—it's no use.

Sometimes I make a great deal of money.

Here was a real-life *Oliver Twist*, spun without the aid of any literary invention. Who wouldn't weep for those that cannot?

THE SON OF A MIDDLE-CLASS LAWYER, Mayhew proved a disappointment to his domineering father by not following him to the bar. Although he excelled at his public school, Westminster, he never completed a formal education, opting instead for the bohemian life of a hack writer. Articles, one-shot theatricals, novels—he took whatever paid. For a short while, he fancied himself a chemist and spent some years learning the science in a lab he built at his brother Alfred's house (he later put some of this knowledge to use in a biography of Humphry Davy aimed at schoolboys). Mayhew was always short of cash, and was briefly bankrupt following the failure of the *Iron Times*, his paper devoted entirely to railway news. His most notable success was the co-founding of the satirical weekly *Punch* in 1841, but his tenure as editor lasted just one year, due to erratic work habits. (He was, however, kept on as "sug-gester-in-chief" for a few years more.)

Mayhew recognized that he was onto something new with his survey of the lower classes, which perhaps explains why he chose to stick with the project for the better part of five years instead of adding it to his long list of half-completed endeavors. After parting ways with the *Chronicle* over editorial differences—he had grown critical of the paper's liberal adherence to free trade—he continued to publish his work in small numbers, now titled *London Labour and the London Poor*. In the preface to the 1861 complete edition, he laid out what he saw as the reason for the project's popularity:

It is believed that the book is curious

for many reasons: It surely may be considered curious as being the first attempt to publish the history of a people, from the lips of the people themselves—giving a literal description of their labour, their earnings, their trials, and their sufferings, in their own "unvarnished" language....

It may be considered curious also as being the first commission of inquiry into the state of the people, undertaken by a private individual, and the first "blue book" [government report] ever published in twopenny numbers.

It is curious, moreover, as supplying information concerning a large body of persons, of whom the public had less knowledge than of the most distant tribes on earth—the government population returns not even numbering them among the inhabitants of the kingdom.

That's a tricky set of criteria to satisfy. Social science tends to be dull (and in the case of economics, dismal), advocacy shrill, and twopenny journalism flippant. A combination of the three suggests Dante's forgotten ditch in the eighth circle, reserved for prattlers. It is our good fortune that Mayhew's intel-

## A history of a people, from the lips of the people themselves.

lectual development left him qualified to write what he did while saving him from the ranks of the bores, the shouters, and the dandies.

Even as its circulation waned, *London Labour* evolved into a sprawling but ever-changing undertaking: a masterpiece of astonishing complexity suited to a man that had always been a dabbler. The interviews became paramount, searching into the lives of his subjects—what card games they played, what plays they attended, what secret jargons they spoke. And, as he fleshed out daily lives in daily speech, he sorted the sinks of London into further subcategories: "the

street-sellers of fish &c.; vegetables; eatables and drinkables; stationary, literature and the fine arts; manufactured articles; second-hand articles; live animals; mineral production and curiosities." He wrote on street buyers and purchasers of "hare-skins, old clothes, old umbrellas, bottles, glass, broken metal, rags, waste paper and dripping"; on "street-finders" who "picked up their living in public thoroughfares" by gathering "dogs'-dung" and cigar ends. Performers—sword-swallowers, fire-eaters, sapient pigs, and talking dogs—took up the bulk of third installment, and whores, thieves, cheats, and beggars were the subject of volume four.

A typical section of *London Labour* begins with Mayhew's brief description of the trade at hand, along with the environments and locales in which it was practiced. The interviews, which varied in number from chapter to chapter, followed. In them, the real wealth of detail about everyday work poured forth. Mayhew kept himself invisible most of the time, working the sense of his questions into the responses he printed. The interviews never suffer from the actuarial tenor of a census-taking. While talking to a middle-aged woman who sold prints from the inside of her umbrella, he manages to call forth information about her customers, her custom, and her earnings, all while preserving a natural and spontaneous tone:

I've sat with an umbrella," she said, "these seven or eight years, I suppose it is.... Well, sir, I think I sell most 'coloured.' 'Master Toms' wasn't bad last summer. 'Master Toms' was pictures of cats, sir—you must have seen them—and I had them different colours.... I sell only to working people, I think; seldom to boys, and seldomer to girls; seldom to servant-maids and hardly ever to women of the town.... I don't remember that ever I have made more than 1 s. 10 d. on an evening. I don't sell, or very seldom indeed, at other times, and only in summer, and when its fine. If I clear 5 s. I counts that a good week.... I seldom clear so much. Oftener 4 s.

Mayhew's easy sociability, to which many of his peers attest, was also crucial to the enterprise in simply convincing his subjects to volunteer. If well-heeled

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London looked upon the city's street people as utterly alien, the converse was just as true. Mayhew's street-side manner allowed him to break through social barriers, which can be seen in his report of an encounter with a brothel-worker:

Did she expect to lead this life till she died? Well, she never did, if I wasn't going to preachify. She couldn't stand that—anything but that.

I really begged to apologize if I had wounded her sensibility; I wasn't inquiring from a religious point of view, or with any particular motive. I merely wished to know, to satisfy my own curiosity.

Well, she thought me a very inquisitive old party, anyhow. At any rate, as I was so polite, she did not mind answering my questions.

Of course, charm and politesse didn't always carry the day. One costermonger rebuffed Mayhew's questioning with a line for the ages: "The press? I'll have nothing to say to it. We are oppressed enough already." A pity the rejoinder was directed at the grocer's would-be champion.

LONDON LABOUR IS NOT A TEXT THAT holds up as a work of science in the manner of *Principia* or *The Descent of Man*. Insofar as today's standards of objectivity are concerned, the methods used to assemble the volumes are quaint. Statisticians would find the numerous lists that pepper the book laughable, not to mention the means employed to ascertain the facts within them. (Though the opportunity to learn the rates of drunkenness among button-molders, carpenters, and the clergy might not be without some appeal.)

Oral historians would find much objectionable as well; and Mayhew's subjective style is but the first of his sins. He questioned his middle-class assumptions more than most of his contemporaries, but kept many of them: his attitudes towards the Irish, Jews, and people of color were all too commonplace, especially in someone so otherwise perceptive. Mayhew regarded many of his subjects as being "in a state of almost brutish ignorance," though he felt that the fault for this "national disgrace" was "assuredly an evil of our own [his middle- and upper-class readers] creation." He also

made judgments about which street people were or weren't deserving of their state, a violation of the rules of oral history, if not advocacy.

A further flaw was Mayhew's occasional tendency to edit or exaggerate the speech of his subjects to suit his editorial needs. His take on Cockney dialect occasionally resembles the speech of Jem Bags, the antihero of his 1834 farce, *The Wandering Minstrel*—one suspects for humorous purposes. More rarely, when Mayhew wanted to press home the righteousness of some cause, the diction of his interviewee might suddenly become more formal, suspiciously so, than it was the preceding passages.

Its foibles aside, *London Labour* does not deserve to be relegated to Victorian Studies. Not only do its charms strike the sight—so does its merit win the soul. Indeed, it is a genotext, the first of its kind, and should be required reading for any aspiring journalist, particularly at a time that has seen the reassertion of advocacy in the news. (Oxford University Press's recent one-volume abridged text, edited by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, would serve the purpose well.) Although the fiction of journalistic objectivity may be wearing thin, the legions of would-be, new-media polemicists, on their smartphones or at the office, would do well to recall that the soundest opinions are produced by feet on the ground—and that talking to ordinary people beats generalizing about them.

There is a reason W.H. Auden put Mayhew (only half in jest) atop "the list" of the "greatest Victorian Englishmen," who "among social anthropologists...is unique...in his...passion for idiosyncrasies of character and speech such as only the very greatest novelists have exhibited." His prose, devoted mostly to topical themes, remains fresh and vital some 160 years down the road because he took the time to observe the simplest of human decencies: he listened. And brought what he heard to life. People are never props in *London Labour* and *the London Poor*; and though they live in Other London, deep in the underbelly of the Crystal Palace, to meet them is to grasp fraternity in hand. **CJR**

JEFFREY GREGGS is the associate editor of The New Criterion.



## What a Country

Two new efforts to make sense of America's struggles

BY JULIA M. KLEIN

IN THE MIDST OF A CROSS-COUNTRY pilgrimage, Iraq war veteran Colby Buzzell finds himself transfixed by an "old dusty American flag" in the hallway of a shabby residential hotel in Cheyenne, Wyoming. "As I approached, it kind of woke me up," he writes in *Lost in America: A Dead-End Journey*, "reminding me again what it is like to be an American: no health care, long hours of hard work, shit pay, and nothing to show for it while you make other people in air-conditioned offices richer and richer."

Buzzell's voice—tough, jaded, sardonic—surfaced in the soldier's blog that became his first book, *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* (2005). Now, as he drifts east from California, he speaks for a generation unmoored by economic stagnation and diminishing opportunity. Buzzell, who chose war over college, has his own issues: grieving the mother he lost to cancer, he has temporarily abandoned his (second) wife and infant son to make this road trip. He travels in a wreck of a car and lives near the derelict edge in cities such as Cheyenne, Des Moines, and Detroit. When he isn't working low-paid jobs or taking photographs of urban decay, he haunts dive bars and drinks himself into a stupor.

Yet he remains better off than most of the marginally employed workers he encounters; his book project and advance set him apart, rendering his journey at least intermittently purposeful. Still, it is not a huge stretch to imagine Buzzell as a character in Don Peck's *Pinched: How the Great Recession Has Narrowed Our Futures and What We Can Do About It*, a rather more sober (in all senses) examination of the contemporary economic landscape. Buzzell fits well into two of Peck's categories of economic losers: he's part of both "Generation R," whose early adulthood has been stunted by recession, and of the non-degreed, nonprofessional middle class, in danger of slipping into the even-more-hopeless urban underclass.

IN OFFICIAL TERMS, THE GREAT RECESSION BEGAN BEFORE MOST OF US NOTICED it, in December 2007, and ended even more inauspiciously in June 2009. This ivory-tower accounting, based on the economy's overall growth, has its obvious limits: for the jobless and the underemployed, mortgage-strapped homeowners,

**Lost in America:**  
**A Dead-End Journey**  
By Colby Buzzell  
Harper  
304 pages, \$24.99

**Pinched:**  
**How the Great Recession Has**  
**Narrowed Our Futures and**  
**What We Can Do About It**  
By Don Peck  
Crown  
224 pages, \$22

and indeed much of America, the recession has persisted well into 2011 with no end in sight. From the once-booming Sun Belt to the inner cities, long-term unemployment, housing foreclosures, and other financial woes have undermined families and communities.

Meanwhile, the political system has turned away from the neediest. Instead of more stimulus programs, the debate in Washington this summer focused on deficit reduction and cuts to entitlement programs. Never has John Edwards's evocation of "two Americas," one rich and one poor, seemed more apt.

Peck appropriates this paradigm in *Pinched*, an expansion of his attention-getting March 2010 cover story in *The Atlantic*, "How a New Jobless Era Will Transform America." Peck calls the United States "a two-speed society, with opportunities for some," and says that the recession has hastened "the ever-more-distinct sorting of Americans into winners and losers, and the slow hollowing of the middle class."

Publishers have taken note. *Pinched* and *Lost in America* are among a series of books that trace the impact of the recession, securing its place in cultural memory. We already have memoirs of complaint, such as Caitlin Kelly's *Malled: My Unintentional Career in Retail* and Ross Perlin's *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy*, and anecdotal histories such as Dale Maharidge and Michael S. Williamson's *Someplace Like America: Tales From the New Great Depression* (see page 34).

In *Pinched*, written in a matter of months, Peck presents neither a sustained work of narrative journalism nor significant original research. Instead, the book is an audacious attempt to synthesize fragmentary existing data and anecdotal reportage into a systematic overview of the social, economic, and cultural fallout of the recession—as well as to prescribe potential remedies.

Like previous recessions, Peck writes, this one has mostly accelerated changes already under way:

Declining industries and companies fail, spurring workers and capital toward rising sectors; declining cities and regions shrink faster, leaving blight; workers whose roles have been

partly usurped by technology are pushed out en masse and never asked to return.

The waning of American manufacturing, the loss of well-paid union jobs, and the advance of information technology requiring new skills are all old news. But Peck goes further, arguing that the recession's tangible aftershocks will affect everything from marriage rates and gender roles to lifetime earnings:

Nearly four years after it began, the Great Recession is still reshaping the character and future prospects of a generation of young adults—and those of the children behind them as well. It is leaving an indelible imprint on many blue-collar men—and on blue-collar culture. It is changing the nature of modern marriage, and, in some communities, crippling marriage as an institution. It is plunging many inner cities into a kind of despair and dysfunction not seen for decades.

These are far-reaching claims, and the most interesting, about the “crippling” of marriage as an institution, seems a tad overwrought. From a feminist perspective, a realignment of marriage, based on a redefinition of traditional roles, might not be entirely a bad thing. Why not let the men stay home and care for their children, while their presumably more employable wives become the primary providers?

Admittedly, there are a few problems with this scenario. Women, as Peck notes, still earn less money than men “partly because of lingering discrimination.” (They also tend to flock to jobs that men have abandoned; the rising number of women in journalism schools is as sure a sign as any of the profession's declining status and pay.) Second, many families need two incomes to survive, or at least to prosper. And, finally, depressed, unemployed men—in addition to being more prone to domestic violence, as Peck points out—are not likely to make stellar partners or child-care providers. When it comes right down to it, most women prefer a man with a job.

Peck seems on target when he writes about the chronically underemployed, job-switching members of “Generation R,” a term he attributes to *New York Times* reporter Steven Greenhouse. Many in their twenties still live

with their parents, or rely on them for financial help. Peck describes their plight this way: “With each passing year of economic weakness, more and more of them find themselves swimming in a seemingly endless adolescence, whose taste has long since grown brackish, and from they cannot fully emerge.”

Peck also discusses the “housebound,” unable to sell their homes in declining neighborhoods; the stressed urban underclass; and the dimming prospects of the “nonprofessional middle class.” He points to the geographic cleaving of American society, with wealth and education increasingly concentrated on the coasts and in a few major cities.

There are some omissions. He doesn't treat in any detail the sometimes-heartbreaking plight of older workers, whose periods of unemployment tend to last longer than the average. Nor does he delve into structural changes in work itself, as increasing numbers of professionals are obliged to accept freelance, consulting, or part-time positions without job security, health insurance, or other benefits. This has long been the trend in academia; over the last decade, a parallel development has transformed the journalism job market, as media companies cut costs, full-time positions become casual or part-time, and displaced staffers struggle to survive.

Peck's solutions comprise a political smorgasbord, apt to anger both liberals and conservatives. “In the short run,” he writes, “austerity, not deficit spending, would be irresponsible.” So he supports targeted spending on infrastructure. He also favors tax reform, including increasing marginal rates.

Once the economy improves, though, Peck wants “binding measures that will close the budget gap and stabilize the national debt in the near future.” More troubling, he endorses a version of Congressman Paul Ryan's controversial plan to privatize Medicare. “We should ... consider converting Medicare into a system of vouchers with which seniors can buy health insurance,” Peck writes, “with the growth in annual voucher payments strictly limited to a rate below that at which medical costs have historically grown.” In other words, he wants to throw seniors on the tender mercies

of insurance companies. How he expects the non-wealthy and the ailing to fare in the individual insurance market, he doesn't say.

And there is more, much of it ripped from the old neoliberal playbook: support for career academies, wage insurance, investment in research and innovation, the loosening of city zoning requirements, campaign finance reform. Even foreclosures could turn out to be a boon, Peck suggests, if they encourage suddenly homeless job seekers to relocate to more prosperous areas. “Reviving that nomadic spirit,” he writes, “is essential to restoring economic health today.”

COLBY BUZZELL POSSESSES THAT NOMADIC spirit, all right, and *Lost in America* is his tribute to Jack Kerouac's 1957 autobiographical novel, *On the Road*. Buzzell's trip is punctuated by the death of his Korean-born mother and informed by the postwar blues. “The last time my life made any sense at all was when I was in the military,” he writes.

Now in his thirties, Buzzell meanders across the country, looking for work (and occasionally finding it), while trying to keep his beloved 1964 Mercury Comet Caliente from expiring. But Buzzell and his memoir don't really hit their stride until he reaches the Motor City.

In Detroit, Buzzell stumbles on an almost surrealistic vision of blight and decay. But an odd thing happens: he falls in love—with the battered landscape, the warmly run residential hotel he has made his home, and the surprisingly friendly people he meets foraging the wrecked city. Here he describes his visit to the deserted Packard auto plant:

At one time, we actually made things within these walls; people made a good living and worked in teams and shipped items off our assembly lines. Now the Packard plant and the ruins of Detroit are large open coffins where artists and vagrants pay their respects, or gravediggers come in to pick a corpse of its copper bones....

Peck gives us a sociological sketch of the recession. Buzzell, at his most eloquent, supplies the poetry. **CJR**

JULIA M. KLEIN is a CJR contributing editor.

## BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

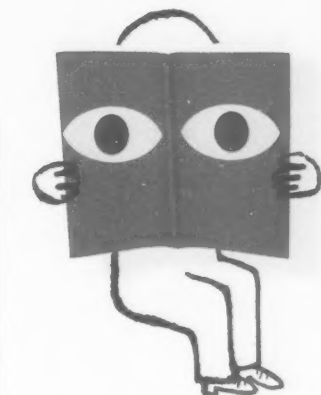
BY JAMES BOYLAN

**The Magnificent Medills:  
The McCormick-Patterson  
Dynasty: America's Royal  
Family of Journalism During a  
Century of Turbulent Splendor**  
By Megan McKinney  
Harper, 464 pages, \$27.99

**Newspaper Titan:  
The Infamous Life and  
Monumental Times of  
Cissy Patterson**  
By Amanda Smith  
Alfred A. Knopf, 720 pages, \$35

THERE IS A BIT OF HYPE in the titling of both of these chronicles. The "magnificent" Medills? Not in my understanding of the term. As depicted by Megan McKinney, they were as a group self-seeking, quarrelsome, greedy, and adulterous; they specialized in making each other miserable. Their claim on posterity was their newspapers, which in their day were more notable for chasing circulation gains, by legal means or otherwise, than for quality journalism. Nor is "titan" precisely the right word for Cissy Patterson; there are more fitting terms (see below).

The dynasty, as defined in these volumes, comprised three and a fraction generations: 1) Joseph Medill, editor and later owner of the *Chicago Tribune*, instrumental in boosting Lincoln into the presidency; 2) his two strident daughters (a third died young), who married men of lesser genetic stuff and put them to work in the family business; and 3) Medill's four grandchildren, three of whom became powerful editors and publishers in the first half of the twentieth century:



Robert R. McCormick, associated with a *Chicago Tribune* that had approximately the reputation for even-handedness enjoyed by Fox News today; his cousin Joseph Patterson, who started out as a Socialist and founded the tabloid *New York Daily News*, which still holds national records for circulation; and his sister, known in her public life as Eleanor Medill Patterson, or Cissy, who was hired to run a broken-down Washington newspaper and went on to buy it and make it profitable. The significant fraction of the fourth generation was Alicia Patterson, who brought forth *Newsday*, an achievement that her father, creator of the *Daily News*, never recognized. Megan McKinney, who identifies herself as an expert on historic Chicago families, has placed more than seventy persons in the family tree at the start of her book, which means that she has to keep moving to cover them all, especially when she allots so much space to the society-page aspects of their lives. But she manages, even when slighting the historical background.

Amanda Smith's biogra-

phy of Cissy is a different matter. Cissy has been the subject of a number of biographies already—most notably the sympathetic 1966 study by a Patterson descendant, Alice Albright Hoge. The author of this most recent volume, a Kennedy, seems to

understand the dynamics and misfortunes of powerful families. She traces Cissy's life (1881–1948) from her early years as a lightly educated little rich girl in Chicago, Washington, and Europe to her debut on an international stage when she insisted on marrying a racially Russian count. With the marriage breaking up, the count kidnapped their child, Felicia, who was recovered only by strenuous efforts and appeals to the tsar.

The account of this episode, more than a hundred pages, illustrates the thoroughness and patience of Amanda Smith, who managed to go beyond the old yellow-press accounts by excavating century-old Russian records on the dispute. Once past this brush with celebrity, Cissy fell into the doldrums; she wrote a novel or two, had another, brief marriage, did a little political correspondence for William Randolph Hearst, tended to her horses and dogs. Hearst gave her a fresh start in 1930, when he offered her the editorship of the *Washington Herald*, with tutoring by such elder Hearstian statesmen as Arthur Brisbane.

Cissy ran the newspaper pretty much according to her own whims, hiring friends or personal employees, firing and unfiring nearly all of the staff, splashing eccentric commentary on page one. To the extent that her paper was intelligible politically, it went along for a time with the New Deal, but when her brother Joe's *Daily News* turned hostile and isolationist from 1940 on, she turned the same way. By that time she had bought the *Herald* and its sibling, the *Times*, from Hearst and made them the most widely read papers in the capital. (After her death the *Times-Herald* was merged into *The Washington Post*.)

Because she joined the *Tribune* and the *Daily News* in attacking Franklin Roosevelt and the war effort, she came to be called "the most hated woman in America." This kind of battering took a toll, as did her alienation from many friends and her closest family, including her own daughter and granddaughter. It seems fitting that Amanda Smith concludes her look at a life so filled with discord by recounting the scurrilous fight over Patterson's will. As a model of research that explores every biographical resource, *Newspaper Titan* is exemplary. Yet it was, as the subtitle proposes, an infamous, rather than titanic, life. **CJR**

JAMES BOYLAN is the founding editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review* and professor emeritus of journalism and history at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst.

# The Cheap Seats

Joe Bageant told uncomfortable truths about class in America

BY SASHA ABRAMSKY

IN THE LAST DECADE OF HIS LIFE, JOE BAGEANT CAME FULL CIRCLE. HE AND his third wife, Barbara, were renting a small, wooden house in Winchester, Virginia, the town where he grew up and from which he had fled repeatedly over the years—always returning, though never long enough to stay. In the late 1970s, he'd come back from Idaho for a while, after his father developed a bad heart, and moved into a mobile home in a poor part of town. During those years, Bageant worked as a reporter at the conservative local paper, the *Winchester Star*. He and a few friends had tried, and failed, to organize the reporters to join The Newspaper Guild; he quit soon after and moved West again.

Now, as he contemplated the onset of old age, Bageant was back in Winchester once more, gray-bearded, overweight, wearing determinedly unfashionable fishermen's outfits, and hanging out with friends from a half-century earlier. He'd talk about everything from making raccoon stew to the state of the union. Underneath it all he was, almost obsessively, writing about and analyzing his poverty-stricken childhood, and contemplating the displacement of the rural poor by the rise of agribusiness and the post-World War II service economy.

Over many years—in articles, online essays, and, later, books—Bageant (pronounced “Bay-gent”) had been something of a lone voice, trying to convince his readers that America's class divisions are as significant to the American story as its race divide; that the myth of American exceptionalism when it came to the absence of class is just that, a myth.

The sixty-four-year-old was a sort of Michael Moore character without the self-promotional gimmickry, remembering—perhaps romanticizing—a vanished world of hard, honest labor and damning the rise of an increasingly vulnerable underclass, numbering many tens of millions, among white, rural Americans and their displaced urban descendants. For these men and women, undereducated and underinformed, the community ecosystem upon which they had previously relied for sustenance no longer existed. The small-town and rural manufacturing and farming jobs they had once been able to count on had vanished; and the work that replaced those jobs, more often than not, paid abysmally and came with no benefits.

What Bageant wrote was, in many instances, offensive—but always brutally insightful. In America, attempts to describe working class culture frequently devolve into “blue collar” humor that celebrates parochialism and an ignorance of the larger world. Bageant saw the humor in his subject matter, but the laughter was always laced with tragedy. For him, blue collar ignorance was a product of, and a gateway to, exploitation. It was a symbol and a symptom of injustice. And

he explored the political conditions of that injustice with an incandescent fury:

They are purposefully held in bondage by a local network of money families, bankers, developers, lawyers, and businesspeople in whose interests it is to have a cheap, unquestioning, and compliant labor force paying high rents and big medical bills. They invest in developing such a labor force by not investing in the education and quality of life for anyone but their own.

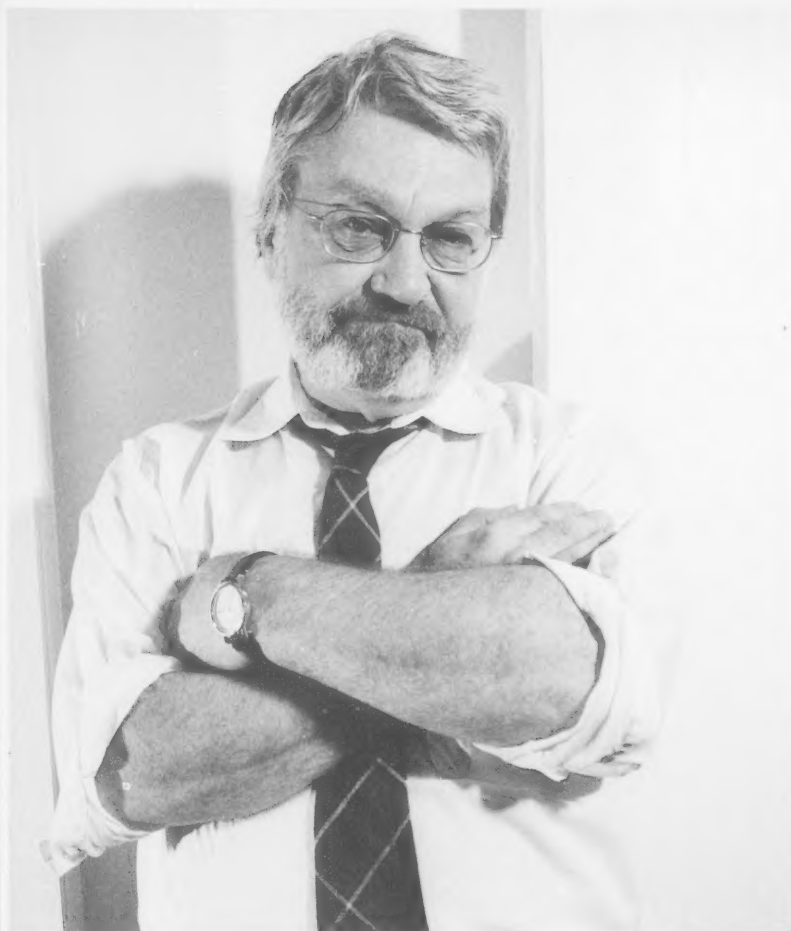
Working class Americans, Bageant wrote sardonically in his second and final book, *Rainbow Pie: A Redneck Memoir*, were “clubbed into submission long ago, and now require only enough medication for our high levels of cholesterol, enough alcohol to keep the sludge moving through our arteries, and a 24/7 mind-numbing spectacle of titties, tabloid TV, and terrorist dramas. Throw in a couple of new flavors of XXL edible thongs, and you've got a nation of drowsing hippos who will never notice that our country has been looted.”

LIKE THOMAS FRANK, THE AUTHOR OF *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, Bageant was preoccupied with the question of why millions of working class Americans have routinely voted against their economic self-interest over the past several decades. “Sometimes I think the GOP emits a special pheromone that attracts fools and money,” he wrote in his first book, *Deer Hunting with Jesus*, published in 2007. How else to explain, he asked, the rise of an anti-tax, anti-government, hyper-conservatism among America's white poor?

Unlike Frank, however, Bageant came to the problem as an insider, as a man who grew up as part of the white, working poor of the South, as someone who understood their prejudices and their fears, their heartache at vanishing ways of life, and the methods by which they measured the good life. He understood working class cynicism, a lack of faith in either political party's ability, or even desire, to make their lives genuinely better. And he understood their resulting fatalism.

As a child Bageant had lived in the insular, subsistence-farming community of Unger, West Virginia; and later





**Rare voice** Bageant grew increasingly frustrated with the fatalism of working-class America.

just over the state line in the town of Winchester, years before I-81 was built and the town became a bedroom community for DC commuters. Nestled deep in the Shenandoah Valley, it was a poor, conservative, deeply religious, and suffocatingly class-bound society, dominated by a largely cashless system of favors and exchanges.

Bageant was, in many ways, the misfit of his family. While his ancestors were only marginally educated, Bageant himself was from a young age drawn to books, to art, to music. Later, he would say how he had always felt Winchester offered few opportunities for a poor kid from the ramshackle wooden homes far from the mansions and brick houses of the town's gentry. Hadley High School routinely lumped the country kids into

the "dumbbell room," and made sure to inform them that they were allowed to leave school at the age of sixteen and could join the Army a year after that.

His teachers told him that because of his background he wasn't cut out for college, and his parents pressured him to work manual jobs from an early age. So Bageant quit school, joined the Navy, and got married. He was discharged in the heart of the 1960s; making up for lost time, he bought an old school bus and headed for San Francisco. En route, the bus broke down in Boulder, Colorado. Bageant and his young family lived there, sometimes on the bus, for several years, before moving to an Indian reservation in Idaho. During that time, Bageant worked a variety of sweaty, laborious jobs until, in the mid-1970s, he broke his

back and had to lie flat for months while he recuperated. It was then, his family recalled, that he started honing his writing skills, using his enforced leisure time to perfect an in-your-face technique that would, over the decades, acquire a cult following. He learned to describe people and scenes intimately, to document his subjects' idiosyncrasies—a technique that would serve him well in his books on redneck culture. He learned how to make his readers laugh and cry.

But as that voice developed, it left Bageant lacking a natural home in the American class system. He was, says his longtime friend Nick Smart, like Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, made too worldly by education and travel to rejoin the working class from which he had come, yet too shaped by that world to ever feel comfortable as an American burgher. He simply couldn't, *wouldn't*, aver that class didn't exist and shape lives; nor could he buy into the American fiction that everyone had an equal opportunity in life. "Joe was fearless," says Smart. "Truth came out of him almost as if he couldn't stop. But he was also funny as shit. He could see the comic irony of this crazy country we're living in."

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Bageant churned out long essays, most of them published online, detailing his thoughts and observations about modern-day America. He was interested in how religion and cultural conservatism were being used by political movements with deeply conservative economic agendas. Like many other contemporary political writers, he was fascinated and depressed by a politics that convinced poor, rural Americans that they should vote not on bread-and-butter issues but for the candidate who most enthusiastically referenced the Bible, talked about guns, and attacked gay rights.

After the election of George W. Bush in 2000, Bageant's writing became increasingly urgent. He thought the Bush presidency was unleashing something akin to class warfare in the country, and yet many of his contemporaries, the poor men and women with whom he drank beers and smoked cigarettes, seemed all too happy to connive in their own demise. It was out of this paradox that *Deer Hunting with Jesus* was born.

The book became something of a

cult sensation among the (admittedly small) group of readers interested in class politics in America. It introduced an extraordinary array of characters—including the author's brother, a demon-expunging preacher who tried to convert Bageant to fundamentalist Christianity during a hunting trip. And the book treated those characters with no sense of condescension or remove. Unlike commentators who use the poor as set decorations in some larger piece of political agitprop, Bageant was simply describing his daily life in Winchester, without intellectual disdain or anthropological distance. Indeed, his mockery of white, working class Americans only succeeded because, like Woody Allen telling Jewish jokes, he was so evidently one of those he mocked. "He liked redneck food. He was a redneck," says one drinking friend. "But he'd read Sartre and Camus."

While *Deer Hunting with Jesus* did all right in the US, it became a best-seller in Australia, and also sold well in Europe. These were, Bageant believed, parts of the world with a more finely tuned sense of class and its ramifications than exists in contemporary America. In the US, by contrast, the class politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was subsumed by post-World War II consumerism, by the idea that everyone identified upward, aspiring to a social status that by default promoted them to a higher class than that of their parents. "It is most politically incorrect in America to suggest that we are not born equally endowed," he wrote in *Rainbow Pie*. "Yet I cannot help but contemplate what effect, if any, the flight of several generations of the brightest kids from heartland laboring America has had on the working class gene pool.... As any dog breeder can tell you, slow wit can be bred in as easily as bred out." Pause. Deadpan stare. Deliver the kicker. "This may help explain the popularity of such things among my class as snowmobiles, Garth Brooks, hot chicken wings, and deep-fried pickles."

And then, on a dime, he turns to the serious business. "Acknowledged or not, it is also our national shame, this denial of the existence of a massive, permanent underclass in America. In doing so, we deny the one truth held in common by

## Bageant sketched an American tragedy, a bleak postscript to Norman Rockwell's version of a wholesome, mid-century America.

every enlightened civilization: we are our brother's keepers."

WHEN HE WROTE *RAINBOW PIE*, BAGEANT, who had taken to spending much of each year in Belize and, later, in the American expat town of Ajijic, in central Mexico, was in his mid-sixties. He was eating unhealthfully; not exercising; smoking and drinking too much in a variety of bars and greasy-spoon cafes around Winchester. "By the time my people hit sixty," he wrote in *Deer Hunting with Jesus*, "we look like a bunch of hypertensive red-faced toads in a phlegm-coughing contest. Fact is, we are even unhealthier than we look."

He was, according to his wife, Barbara, and friends, increasingly enraged at the state of America and, more particularly, at the working class itself. There was, says Barbara, a sense of "hopelessness" that came to pervade her husband. After his fourth martini he'd become morose, sometimes aggressive. He was known to throw drinks in people's faces. Perhaps, in some way, Bageant might even have had a death wish.

"Toward the end his bitterness was overwhelming," says his friend Nick Smart. "He became a recluse; he was tortured by the role that was thrust upon him by fate. There aren't many Bageants out there: Studs Terkel, Hunter Thompson. He saw working-class Winchester as in a morass, a continuous cycle of life getting worse, not better. They didn't have aspirations. It was almost like the caste system in India. The rednecks were so ignorant, lacking in aspirations to change, and the system was conspiring to exploit them."

And yet *Rainbow Pie* is not a bitter book. If anything, it is more reflective than his first book. Unwell, thinking both of his own mortality and of the increasingly dysfunctional politics of

the country, he retreated into nostalgia, looking to explore the America of his youth, the personalities and beliefs of a vanished world. Perhaps he knew that he hadn't long to live. His memoir was, in some way, a grand farewell note.

In late 2010, Bageant was diagnosed with colon cancer. Despite receiving treatment at the local Veterans Administration hospital in Winchester, he understood that his prospects were bleak. Unsentimental, he wanted no funeral; he even tried to argue his family out of having obituaries published. When news of his death was announced, his website was inundated with messages of condolence from his fans across the globe, and from friends and acquaintances in the region that he was never able to leave.

Bageant was raised in America's cheap seats, watching the drama of post-war prosperity from afar. Despite his copious writerly talents, as he got older he returned to those cheap seats. It was, he believed, where America's most interesting characters sat. From those seats, Bageant sketched an American tragedy, a bleak postscript to Norman Rockwell's version of a wholesome mid-century America. Tom Cave, a childhood friend, never quite agreed with Bageant's political credo, or with his analysis that working Americans were being subjected to one snow job after another, but the more he read of Bageant's work the more he came to realize that his friend represented something good, something valuable. "I've always been more or less conservative," he says in a soft voice, fighting back tears. "I love the flag, love America and all that stuff. Joe did, too. That's why he tried to change things." **CJR**

SASHA ABRAMSKY is a freelance writer based in Sacramento, California. His work appears regularly in *The Nation*, *Salon*, and other magazines. His most recent book is titled *Inside Obama's Brain* (Penguin, 2009).

# THEY KILLED CLASSIFIEDS, DIDN'T THEY?

a review of TIME OUT NEW YORK by TED RALL

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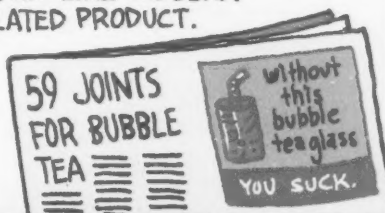
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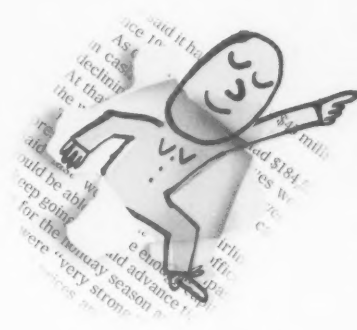


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# Happy Birthday, Wikipedia!

BY MICHAEL SCHUDSON AND KATHERINE FINK



WIKIPEDIA IS CELEBRATING ITS TENTH anniversary this year, to the surprise of skeptics who never thought a volunteer-written, open-access encyclopedia would make it. To them, the online encyclopedia appeared doomed to suffer from either a lack of participation or, alternatively, the whims of overzealous or malicious users. Yet, Wikipedia has become, as *BusinessWeek* put it, “the first stop for bar wagers, high school paper writers, oppo researchers, and anyone trying to figure out what the Peace of Westphalia did or when the mortgage-backed security was invented or whom Ringo Starr replaced as the Beatles’ drummer.” By May of this year, Wikipedia had published 18 million articles in 281 languages.

Why has Wikipedia survived, and flourished? One reason is that it’s easy for anyone to contribute. But another reason is that Wikipedia has a set of rules or five “pillars,” and a fairly intricate bureaucracy to enforce them. These pillars are: that Wikipedia function as an encyclopedia (not a dictionary or a newspaper or anything else); that it have a neutral point of view (NPOV); that it be free; that editors interact respectfully with one another; and that its rules not be firm.

Professors Sorin Adam Matei and Caius Dobrescu took the second pillar, that of the neutral point of view, and gave it close examination in the January 2011 *Information Society*. They analyzed discussions on Wikipedia’s “Neutral Point of View” page (through early 2007) to explore how the policy works in practice. They observe that NPOV, while apparently widely accepted in principle by Wikipedia users, has been a source of continual conflict. “Many of its core statements, including its compulsory nature, have been attacked or discounted,” they write.

The authors found that Wikipedia users often disagree about how to apply NPOV. Wikipedia’s own five pillars entry encourages readers “to avoid advocacy and ... characterize issues rather than debate them.” Some users on the NPOV page, however, argued that remaining neutral is impossible when users are expected to determine for themselves which points of view were “significant” enough to be represented in articles. Others held that the NPOV policy favors presenting conflicting points of view over commonly agreed upon facts. According to Matei and Dobrescu, this encourages users to enter into “edit wars” with one another. Users suggested on Wikipedia’s NPOV page that more passionate users can push their

**In this column, the authors cull current scholarly writing about journalism for fresh ideas.** Suggestions for possible mention are welcome at [editors@cjr.org](mailto:editors@cjr.org).

viewpoints through simply by wearing down their detractors.

The authors found that most debates they read on Wikipedia’s NPOV page ended without resolution. That led them to conclude that ambiguity is at the heart of NPOV’s success. For them, the NPOV policy “is ambiguous and its ability to guarantee objectivity and neutrality questionable.”

Although it’s easy to see how the authors reached this conclusion, policy-related conflicts do get resolved at Wikipedia. In fact, its dispute-resolution process is pretty complex. Wikipedia has become more bureaucratic since its inception. Contributors are granted varying levels of access, from “stewards” down to “unregistered users.” One level is even reserved for nonhuman contributors. Wikipedians have created hundreds of so-called bots that “detect and revert vandalism, monitor certain articles and, if necessary, ban users,” according to Sabine Niederer and José van Dijck, who wrote about Wikipedia’s structure in the December 2010 *New Media and Society*.

Wikipedia’s bureaucratic structure kicks in to settle NPOV-related conflicts. When users are unable to resolve disagreements on the discussion pages of particular entries, they can post a public call for outside opinions, bring in a mediator, or, as a last resort, take the dispute to Wikipedia’s Arbitration Committee. The committee is made up of eight users who are elected annually. In 2010, the committee ruled on disputes over climate-change and transcendental-meditation pages, among others, and banned users who were found to have violated Wikipedia’s policies.

Ambiguity and conflict are contexts of NPOV policy, but not its heart. Wikipedia operates in the face of an irreducible sum of uncertainty—as do journalism and science—so people discuss, debate, and negotiate in the service of a common principle, sometimes without resolution. Disputes over NPOV may not be ironed out using a single, unerring interpretation of policy, but reasonable processes are in place to take them on. **CJR**

MICHAEL SCHUDSON teaches at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. KATHERINE FINK is a Ph.D. student in Communications at Columbia.

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